

# Echoes of Memory

Volume II



UNITED STATES  
HOLOCAUST  
MEMORIAL  
MUSEUM



Echoes of  
**Memory** Volume II



# Contents

## **Jacqueline Mendels Birn**

Daily Miracles That Saved the Mendels Family .....	2
The Cello in My Life .....	5

## **Ruth Cohen**

A New Era Arrived.....	10
My Paternal Grandparents.....	11

## **Marcel Drimer**

Interview with Polish TV .....	13
--------------------------------	----

## **Albert Garih**

Elie Wiesel.....	16
------------------	----

## **Agi Geva**

Leaving Home.....	17
The Aftermath: Right after Liberation, Silence Begins.....	19

## **Peter Gorog**

Did Your Mom Pray during the Holocaust? .....	21
Enduring Melodies.....	23
WHAT YOU DO MATTERS: A Letter to My Family .....	25

## **Julie Keefer**

Rex—A Pet?.....	27
Visit to L'viv: Janowska.....	28

## **Louise Lawrence-Israëls**

A Special Moment.....	33
The Staircase .....	34

## **Michel Margosis**

Onward to America: A New World .....	36
--------------------------------------	----

## **Harry Markowicz**

Collateral Damage.....	41
They Are Coming for Me.....	46

## **Alfred Münzer**

A Life in a Box .....	49
Guests .....	50

## **Halina Yasharoff Peabody**

Tracing Roots through Our Ancestors .....	52
---	----

## **Alfred Traum**

Mamlock House .....	55
Vienna Chanukah 1938.....	56

## **Susan Warsinger**

Rosh Hashanah This Year .....	58
Schiffchen oder Hütchen (Little Boat or Little Hat) .....	60

## **Martin Weiss**

Living Up to Our Values .....	62
Many Times Born, Many Times Died .....	64

# Foreword

This 11th volume of *Echoes of Memory* brings together the work of Holocaust survivor writers of The Memory Project; some have now been writing about their lives and memories of the Holocaust for more than a decade. The texts compiled here recount the long experience of witnessing, the pressing charge these survivors feel to remember, to memorialize, and to spur readers to action in a changing world. The commitment to this work of translating their experience for an audience of readers, some who may be learning about the Holocaust for the first time, is the work of making important connections, for a reader, to the world we live in now.

Marcel Drimer's account, titled *Interview with Polish TV*, tells of his work in speaking out about a new law in Poland that would criminalize perceived attacks on Polish history. He describes his interview with a Polish news outlet and also his own experience with Poles who harmed his family, contrasting that with the Polish family who saved 13 Jews, including himself, his parents, and his sister. His personal story becomes an example of the importance of speaking freely about history—and all the more moving because it is his firsthand testimony about what happened during the Holocaust.

Readers of this volume will also learn about the experience of living a long life after trauma, reading more about the ways the Holocaust experience continually intrudes on the daily lives of survivors. Through Harry Markowitz's work titled *They Are Coming for Me*, the reader is led through his experience of waiting to be taken in for surgery, which suddenly conjures up memories of hiding from the Nazis as a young child. This work too shares an implied warning, makes a connection for us to the future. We can't help but see, through reading his memory, that the worlds children inhabit are the worlds they carry with them into their adult lives; inhumanity casts a long shadow.

Another text in this volume, *Leaving Home*, first focuses on the writer Agi Geva's young life before the Holocaust. A day she describes of going with friends to a nearby pool stands in stark contrast to events that occurred in Hungary just one year later. The shock she conveys through her story gives voice to how quickly she experienced this shift. The text she has crafted juxtaposes these two times in her life, helping a reader to see how immediately life changed for Agi and her family.

Each of these texts connects us with the voices of survivors who have made it the work of their later years to keep reminding us, through their speeches, their interviews, and here through their personal writing, what can happen when we fail to heed the warning of their experiences. This long commitment to writing personal memoir is remarkable, though not surprising. These writers have gone beyond bearing witness to the events they experienced during the Holocaust to helping us to interpret, for the present and for our future, the responsibility we each have to speak out against hatred. Each story here helps us to understand more urgently the actions we must take to, as Elie Wiesel has written, "prevent my past from becoming another person's—another peoples'—future."

This work, told through individual stories of lives lived through and after the Holocaust, continues to add to what we may understand about that past, while also, maybe more than ever before, providing a guideline for how we must act on our understanding.

*Maggie Peterson, PhD, Writing Instructor, The Memory Project*



## Daily Miracles That Saved the Mendels Family

### Jacqueline Mendels Birn

**Born in Paris, France, in 1935, Jacqueline Mendels Birn fled with her family to the Vichy-controlled southern region of France, where they lived together under surveillance for the remainder of the war.**

**IT WAS A MIRACLE** that while my father continued going to his office after the “Aryanization” of his business with his Jewish star on, he was not arrested and taken away to an internment camp between May 1941, when Jews were first rounded up, and the end of July 1942, when we fled.

It was a miracle that we were not arrested while we walked in our neighborhood with our yellow Jewish stars on the left side of our clothes.

It was a miracle that neither the concierge of our building nor the neighbors denounced us.

It was a miracle that we were not caught in the Vel d’Hiv roundup of 13,000 Jews in Paris on July 16–17, 1942—we were registered at our local city hall. (The police came to get us one week after we fled Paris.)

It was a miracle that the police did not ask for my parents’ papers in the metro or at the train station or on the train on the day we fled, July 31, 1942.

It was a miracle that when Manuela fell on her head in Angoulême, she did not have a concussion and did not have to be treated in a hospital, because we would have been arrested there. It was not legal for us Jews to travel; my parents did not have an *ausweis* (visa). My parents did not have false papers at that time. Their IDs said “JUIF,” and we were not wearing our compulsory yellow stars.

It was a miracle that we crossed the demarcation line in the middle of the night on August 1, 1942, with German soldiers a few feet from us, but that they did not notice us and they did not have their vicious dogs with them. They did not hear Manuela say that she had to go pee pee when we were lying flat on the ground.



It was a miracle that the two young smugglers did not denounce us while leading us across the demarcation line. Some smugglers took money from Jews and then denounced them to the Gestapo and received money from them as well.

It was a miracle that, after my parents were arrested, interrogated, fined, and kept one month in a hotel under daily watch in Périgueux, in the Dordogne, we were not sent to an internment camp. At the same time, in August 1942, there were roundups of Jews in Périgueux and all around the Dordogne and in the département to the north, the Creuse.

It was a miracle that my mother, a foreign Jewish woman of German origin, was not sent to Gurs, an infamous camp where many German Jews were sent and from where most inmates were shipped to Auschwitz.

It was a miracle that we were allowed by the *préfet* (prefect) to “hide under watch” in a village close to the headquarters of the office for foreign Jewish affairs in Sarlat (less than 60 miles away). The préfet determined life or death for Jews.

It was a miracle that my mother, who carried cyanide pills at all times for a family suicide (and she told my sister and me about it), did not reach the point where she administered the pills to us all.

It was a miracle that when the Gestapo came to the house in Le Got to arrest our downstairs neighbor who had been denounced as a member of the underground, the Gestapo did not go up the stairs to where my parents were listening to the BBC in French.

It was a miracle that our neighbor, with a gun to his neck, did not denounce us, the Jewish family upstairs, in order to save his life.

It was a miracle that with our “*carte de circulation temporaire*” (temporary travel permit by foot or bicycle) for foreign Jews with the stamp “JUIF” in red, we were not arrested when we went to the neighboring village on Saturdays for food or visits to the doctor.

It was a miracle that the mayor, Paul Delpech, went to the headquarters for foreign Jewish affairs in Sarlat every three months to renew our permit for the “*carte de circulation temporaire*” and it was renewed with the stamp “JUIF,” but the police, who knew our address, did not come to arrest us.

It was a miracle that on February 23, 1943, there was a list of foreign Jews to be deported, including Dutch Jews. At the time, Dutch Jewish families with multiple children were exempt from the transport. My parents, with two children and a third child on the way, were not deported.

It was a miracle that when my mother could not give birth at home because the baby was in breech position, on August 6, 1943, she was transported to a hospital in the middle of the night. That hospital was in another département. The midwife probably knew and trusted the doctor in Montayral, Lot-et-Garonne. As a foreign Jew, my mother was not allowed to travel more than 10 kilometers and was forbidden from crossing into another département. Besides, she was only allowed to travel those 10 kilometers on Saturdays. It was a Friday night and my brother was born on Saturday, August 7, 1943. There were no police or Gestapo that night to arrest her.

It was a miracle that the Gestapo did not come to the hospital where my brother was born and stayed for three weeks with my mother, who almost died in August 1943 when all of France was occupied. It was a miracle that when my mother needed a blood transfusion, her rare blood type, AB+, was found.

It was a miracle that my brother survived until milk was found that agreed with him. He did not digest cow's milk, but my father managed to find Nestlé sweetened condensed milk, which agreed with my brother's digestion.

It was a miracle that no one in the village denounced us and that neither the militia nor the collaborators looked for us or found us in the village.

It was a miracle that when the Germans retreated after D-Day, the division "Das Reich" did not stop in our village. The village of Oradour-sur-Glane, just north of our village, was denounced as having resistance members among the inhabitants. That village was destroyed. All the men were shot and the women and children were locked in the church, which was burned to the ground. To this day, the village is a memorial to those killed.

It was a miracle that after D-Day, the *kommandantur* in Paris ordered German officers to go to each *commune* (district) and demand a list of Jews from each mayor. By that time, the mayor of our commune, who worked in the resistance and created false ID cards for its members, had gone into hiding for fear of being denounced and shot or deported. He would have been forced to declare the names of Jews in his commune, and that would have been the end for us.

# The Cello in My Life

**MUSIC HAS ALWAYS BEEN A LARGE PART OF MY LIFE.** I recall, when I was perhaps six years old, my mother would play songs on the piano from “*Blanche Neige et les sept Nains*” (Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs), and my sister and I would sing along.

My father used to whistle a short melody when he approached our home: it was the first few bars, the leitmotiv, of Schubert’s “Unfinished Symphony.” He whistled this melody his whole life. When we were in a crowd and he couldn’t see us, we would hear his whistle and were promptly reunited.

The piano we had at home was a Gaveau, a spinet, and it was against the back wall in the room where my sister and I slept. My mother loved her black and shiny mahogany piano. She got it ten years after she married my father. She had played since she was a child. Her mother had been her first teacher. My maternal grandmother played the piano for the silent movies in Hamburg, Germany, where she lived. This was to earn some money at the time of the Great Depression in Germany after World War I, which they called “the Great War.”

Almost every night I asked my mother to play for us “Mozart, page nine,” meaning page nine in the book of Mozart sonatas. It was a sonatina for piano in C major, K 545. My sister and I loved that sonata and we fell asleep listening to it. Recently, I was able to find a CD of Mozart sonatas for piano interpreted by Walter Klien, and the biggest surprise was that I found that sonata, the last one on the CD. I immediately emailed my sister and told her that she should buy that CD. We both love that piece. I was able to find the first few measures of that sonatina on my iPhone, and that is the sound I hear when someone calls me on my cell phone.

In November 1941, my mother received a letter from our grandmother, telling her that she would not go on living because she had received the “command” from the Gestapo and was supposed to report the next morning for deportation. She knew exactly what that meant because so many of her friends had already disappeared and never returned. When my mother received that letter, she sat at her piano and played a sonata by Chopin.

In 1942 we were still in Paris. Life was becoming more and more dangerous for Jews. We wore the Jewish star, big and yellow, on the left side of our jackets. I thought it looked very pretty on my green sweater. We fled on July 30, 1942, after miraculously escaping the terrible Vel’ d’Hiv roundup of 13,000 Jews including 4,000 children on July 16–17, 1942. My father had been able to move the piano at night and carry it to a nice neighbor across the yard in another building in the group of apartment houses where we lived. To this day, I wonder how it was possible to carry the

piano down the stairs, across the yard to Monsieur Langlais, who kept my mother's piano for the duration of the war. He never touched it or let his young son, Jacqui, play it for fear that neighbors might ask how he suddenly had a piano in his apartment. My parents tried to remove all valuable objects and leave them with a kind neighbor. It was a very good idea because our apartment housed German occupying forces after we fled. The French police came to take us to a concentration camp one week after we fled.

Then followed the terrible years. After we crossed the demarcation line into the unoccupied zone, in the middle of the night, my parents were arrested, interrogated, and detained for a month. The authorities granted us freedom after we paid a heavy fine and under strict conditions: we were registered as Jews, illegal and foreign. We were declared as such in all the offices for Jewish affairs, all the way to Vichy, we were under surveillance, under watch, in a minuscule village in Dordogne, less than 100 kms away from its local capital, Périgueux, and the headquarters for Jewish affairs, in Sarlat. Neither the French police nor the Gestapo came to get us. Sometimes we had to hide in the woods, even in a chicken coop, whenever there was a warning of visits by French *gendarmes*, French militia, or Gestapo. Every day alive was a miracle. For my parents it was an ordeal and constant fright, but for my sister and me, it was like a long vacation. We even went, for a while, to the little school in the next village. We sang the hymn to honor Maréchal Pétain which started with "*Maréchal, nous voilà ...*." Instead of learning the Marseillaise, we learned songs from the teacher and from the other children, and we even went to Mass a few times. I don't remember being hungry. And we survived.

After November 1942, all of France was occupied. Every Sunday, my parents lifted their glass and made a toast, "*A dimanche prochain,*" hoping to be alive another week, until the next Sunday. I gave that sentence as the title of my memoirs. We never sang at home during those years.

While we still had electricity, and my parents had a shortwave radio (until they exchanged it for food), they would turn on the radio to BBC broadcasts in French. The leitmotiv announcing the news was the first few measures of Beethoven's fifth symphony, just the rhythm, not the sound. That was the extent of the music we heard during those times.

Then my brother, Franklin, was born in the worst of times in August 1943 and under atrocious conditions. (He was named after Franklin Roosevelt, whom my parents' saw as their only hope for survival.) Franklin survived and brought all of us a lot of joy.

After the liberation of Paris and of most of France, we were able to go back home to Paris at the end of 1944. Our apartment was in shambles. Little by little, my father found out through the Red Cross that almost everyone in our close family, including my Dutch grandmother and a little

cousin, Mirjam, 19 months old, had been rounded up, deported, and murdered in Sobibor or Auschwitz. At first, I learned that at least 29 members of our family were murdered. Now I know that at least 200 members of our extended Dutch family were murdered.

After the war, my mother got her piano back. She took me to a piano teacher for lessons. I learned to read the left-hand clef (la clef de Fa) and the right-hand clef (la clef de Sol), but I was very poorly coordinated and didn't like the teacher at all. She was very sad looking, all dressed in black, her living room furniture covered with sheets. It was depressing, and I did not want to continue lessons with her. My mother asked me if I wanted to try to play the cello. I had no idea what a cello was.

I have to say here that I come from a family of musicians, going back to my maternal great-great-grandmother, who was a singer. The descendants who survived the Holocaust also play instruments and there are two professional cellists; one of them died at the age of 90. One is also a professional violinist, and four others are in a quartet, the Rafael ensemble. They were all rescued as children on the Kindertransport from Hamburg to London in 1938.

Through a violinist friend of my mother, Monsieur Chédel, who was teaching the violin to my sister, we were given the name of a cello teacher, Monsieur Victor Clerget. I went there with my mother. He lent me a three-quarter size cello and showed me how to hold the bow and play open strings: *la, ré, sol, do*, as we say in French, meaning A, D, G, C in English. All my life I have to say the notes in French and count the measures in French. We went home and when my father came home, I sat down in front of the family and played the four open strings. I was so proud and happy and thought it sounded beautiful. That was the beginning of my love story with the cello. Soon, I was able to play sonatinas and concerti, but I always started with exercises, scales, and more and more difficult studies. I still practice every night and I feel guilty if I don't. It feels like abandoning my child.

My parents took us to an operetta a few years after the end of the war. The operetta played and sang Johann Strauss waltzes, and I was so delighted that my parents offered me a record of Strauss music for my birthday. It was a 78 rpm record as they made them in those days. Later we went to the same theater, the Châtelet, and heard Hoffman's tales by Jacques Offenbach. I loved it.

I practiced the cello every day after school, and soon my teacher told my parents that I was very talented. I took lessons twice a week, two hours each time. My teacher wanted me to become a professional cellist. I went to a second teacher, a famous cello professor, Maurice Maréchal. I remember taking the crowded metro with my cello and going for a lesson in his apartment on the sixth floor of his building. There was no elevator. I was out of breath when I reached his door and

was scared of him and his critiques and corrections of my playing. I practiced six hours a day; sometimes I practiced in the garden with my back to the sun and my cello in the shade. I continued academic studies by correspondence school.

After preparing for entry auditions to the prestigious Conservatoire de Musique de Paris, I realized that I had terrible stage fright and I gave up the idea of preparing for a career in music. I was 16. It was a difficult decision and I cried in bed at night, because suddenly I didn't know what I would study or do in my life. I went back to school, majored in sciences, and I continued practicing the cello, taking lessons, and playing for my own pleasure. I played sonatas with my mother, and we played trios with my sister on the violin, my mother on the piano, and me on the cello. We had a dog, a white setter, and he used to lie down under my chair when I was practicing.

Music was and is an essential part of my life. I had no grandmothers, no grandfathers, no cousins, no uncles or aunts. They had all been murdered. All I had was my parents, my big sister, my baby brother, and my cello. The cello became my first love and remained the love of my life.

My teacher found for me a full-size instrument. It had been in an attic and was in bad shape. He took it to a luthier to have it restored. It was and is a beautiful instrument, a French Mirecourt from approximately 1860, and it has a beautiful sound. Whenever we went on vacation, I took my cello along. One summer, I borrowed a large wooden cello case from my teacher and we put it on the roof rack of the car because there was no room in the trunk. I even went hitchhiking with a backpack and my cello. That was not very wise, I am sure.

I met Richard, an American student who was on a French government fellowship to study French foreign policy in Paris. When he asked me to marry him, I went to New York with my cello. I am not sure if he realized that the cello was such an essential part of my life.

We have now been married 59 years. Richard joined the American Foreign Service, and we lived in many countries around the world. I played chamber music in Helsinki. I played in the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra. I played quartets in Mexico City. I played trios and quartets in Toronto and in Malta and on Maltese television and on the baroque stage of the Manoel Theatre. Back in Washington, I have played in the McLean Symphony as principal cellist. I played in the Friday Music Club, and in small groups, mostly string quartets. We give concerts and play in outreach programs for retirement communities. I play in several different groups at different times.

For the past five years, I have played Jewish music as a soloist and with a string quartet on the occasion of International Holocaust Remembrance Day at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. We performed in front of the diplomatic corps, officials of the US government, and

Holocaust survivors. It is every year a very emotional moment for me, especially when I play “Ani Maamin.”

While my parents were alive, whenever I went for a visit with them in Cannes where they had retired, my mother borrowed a cello and we played sonatas together. She asked me to bring my own bow, because she knew that no one likes to play with a borrowed bow. I had to explain to the security agents that I was carrying a bow and not a weapon.

Music has always been a joy for me, as well as a consolation. After I received the news in 1988 of my brother Franklin’s suicide, I sat down at the cello, I cried, and I played a suite by Bach. My conductor encouraged me to come back to play in the orchestra, and I remember crying and playing at the same time. My mother had done the same thing. After my mother died, and after my father died, I played.

I have not yet decided what music I want to be played during my last days of life, or during my funeral, but I will decide that soon and will tell my children.

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## A New Era Arrived

### Ruth Cohen

**Ruth Cohen, from Mukachevo, Czechoslovakia, was first imprisoned with her sister in Auschwitz in April 1944, then in several other concentration and work camps beginning in October of the same year.**

**IN 2011 I WAS SURPRISED TO GET AN EMAIL** from someone in Philadelphia asking me to get in contact with a Mr. Thomas Walther, an attorney in Germany. He was one of two main prosecutors of World War II criminals active at that time. When we finally talked, he asked me if I would be willing to join a group of Auschwitz survivors who were being asked to fill out testimonials stating that Oscar Groening had been the bookkeeper in Auschwitz during the time I was there. He did not promise a positive outcome of the trial but promised that they would put their best effort forward.

The next time I spoke with him, he asked that I come to Germany, with all my expenses paid, to testify at the trial. "I cannot go to Germany," was my answer. He understood and sympathized with my feeling. Walther asked if I could fill out a form he would send to me, regarding the time I spent in Auschwitz.

The prosecutors in that case were trying to overturn a 1969 ruling that stated being a staff member at Auschwitz was not enough reason to secure a conviction for crimes against humanity. This had been challenged in 2011 with the landmark conviction of John Demjanjuk, a killing center guard, who had been living in the United States and working in an automobile factory. Although he died in 2012 before his appeal could be heard, the outcome of that appeal was that the Federal Court of Justice did not reverse the lower court's decision.

The case against Groening was not exactly the same because Demjanjuk was a Nazi guard, not just a camp staff member. Still, the prosecutors succeeded in convicting Groening. The conviction was appealed and when the appeal was not successful, he was sentenced to four years in prison to be served depending on the state of his health. A new precedent had been set. Since a verdict by the lower court in Luneburg is final and not to be challenged, this new legal precedent applied to prosecuting all remaining former Nazis. When I received the email in April 2015 alerting me of this news, I felt that a new era had arrived.



But now, maybe I think the new era is not yet here. Oscar Groening died at home on March 9, 2018, at the age of 96 years, waiting to hear about his jail time. In the end, he was spared the ordeal of imprisonment. The only positive thing is that even after his death, the impact of his verdict (upheld by the court in Luneburg and confirmed by the federal court in Karlsruhe) will stand for any other remaining Nazis. Convictions are possible for staff members, along with prison guards, who were actively working in concentration camps.

## My Paternal Grandparents

**MY MATERNAL BUBBE AND ZEYDE** (Yiddish for grandmother and grandfather) died before I was born, so I want to write about the grandparents who I knew—my father's parents.

My zeyde Samuel was a tall, handsome man with a beautiful grayish beard. He seemed to be smiling most of the time. I don't remember ever being admonished by him. After he retired, he was an ombudsman. I was seven years old when he died of pneumonia. I remember his funeral vividly. The street my bubbe and zeyde lived on was filled with people from all over town and neighboring villages.

My bubbe Esther was short. She was a good-looking woman with a dairy business of her own. Unlike my zeyde, my bubbe did not smile often; she was always busy. She did not even have time to admonish us, but we felt her love anyway. My fondest memory is being at my bubbe and zeyde's table for most of the holidays. The most memorable was Purim. We had lunch at their very long table with many of our extended family members, some who traveled long distances to be there. Every few minutes, a group of young or old people would walk into the dining room, present a Purim spiel (a skit), get some money, and leave. This would go on for many hours of the afternoon. Our town had lots of beggars and poor people, but the people coming in were not doing it for the money, just in the spirit of the holiday. It was fun.

After my zeyde died, we moved in with my bubbe for a short time (though I don't know why), and then she moved in with us. My bubbe was a very independent woman—being a businesswoman at the time was unusual and special. She was used to being the boss. However, when she moved in with us, she let my mother, Bertha, be in charge of the house without interfering with anything. This made for a fairly peaceful life.

When my bubbe was 81 she suffered a stroke during our Shabbat dinner. She slipped into a coma and stayed that way for nine months, “sleeping” in our house. When she woke up, she said to my mother, “You too have a little dog in you.” This was her way of letting my mother know that she had been aware of what was happening around her during that time and didn’t always approve of my mother.

At 83 years old, she went to Auschwitz along with us.

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## Interview with Polish TV

Marcel Drimer

**Born in Drohobycz, Poland, in 1934, Marcel Drimer survived the war first by hiding in secret bunkers in the town's ghetto, then in the home of a Ukrainian family.**

**ON JANUARY 27, 2018, INTERNATIONAL HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY,** the Polish government passed a bill that would make it illegal to accuse the Polish nation or Polish people of complicity in Nazi war crimes.

For that reason, I am very upset with the current political situation in Poland. Even though I left the country 57 years ago, I am in contact with friends and family who still live there, and their quality of life and freedom of expression matter greatly to me. Therefore, when Diane Saltzman from the Museum called me to ask if I would accept an interview with Polish TV Station POLSAT, I gladly agreed. Since I read the liberal Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza* (Election Newspaper) every morning, I felt well informed and capable of answering the interviewer's questions. The next day a couple of journalists working for POLSAT, an independent (nongovernmental) TV station showed up at our home. The stations owned by the government are censored. They would not like to hear what I had to say, and I would have not agreed to talk to them.

The interview lasted over an hour. It was shown in Poland the next day and lasted 12 minutes. The interviewer was interested in my experiences during the war and my encounters with Poles. I gave her several examples of how the actions of some Poles almost cost us our lives.

I related what happened in August 1942 when a 12-year-old Polish boy showed the Germans and their collaborators that they missed the apartment in which five members of my family lived. These family members were killed in the Belzec extermination camp.

In the Drohobycz ghetto there were frequent *Aktions* (pogroms), so my parents prepared a hole under the floorboards and covered it with a mattress, as the beds had already been taken away. One day during an *Aktion*, we hid in the hole. My uncle Abraham, my mother's brother (we called him Bumek), was sick that day and did not go to work. The Germans and Polish policemen came to our apartment, walked around, and pretended to close the door. Bumek was claustrophobic

and lifted the mattress to breathe. At that moment, we heard in Polish “get out, get out, birdie.” One of the Polish policemen had been Bumek’s schoolmate and now wanted a bribe for not reporting us. After a while Bumek lifted the mattress and asked Mother and another woman hiding with us to give him all the money they had. We were lucky that they robbed us of money and not our lives.

After escaping the ghetto, my family hid in the lumber factory where my father worked. There, a friend told Father about a woman, Teresa, who suspected Father was hiding somebody. She had seen him in the middle of the night carrying food and said she planned to report him to the authorities and be rewarded with a kilo of sugar for each person revealed. The situation was grave; something had to be done. Father knew a doctor working in a nearby clinic. This doctor wrote an anonymous letter to the SS pretending to be a German officer on leave from the front who had a sexual encounter with Teresa, infecting him with syphilis. Very soon two German soldiers came to the factory and took Teresa to the clinic where the doctor worked. He “confirmed” that Teresa had syphilis and she was taken away.

But we knew we had to find another place to hide. Father searched among local farmers for someone willing to hide us. He encountered many who blackmailed him by threatening to denounce him if he did not give them a bribe. There were many similar examples of greed, hatred, and lack of humanity.

On the other hand, an example of what was good and noble in Poland is the Sawinski family. They first agreed to hide my mother and sister, Irena, both blond and blue-eyed, Aryan looking. I presented more of a problem because, as a Jewish boy, I was circumcised. If we were discovered, we and the Sawinskis would all be killed. After a heart-wrenching meeting, Mrs. Sawinski agreed to hide me as well. Eventually their family hid 13 Jews. The Sawinskis were given the honor of Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem and their names are listed at the Museum.

The television interviewer also asked my opinion about the new Polish law concerning the responsibility of Poles for the Holocaust. I criticized that law and the general attitude in Poland, adding that nationalism is not patriotism. Having lived in Poland for most of my youth, loving Polish music and literature, being in contact with longtime friends, I do care about the country. The journalists sent me a link to our interview, which I forwarded to all my Polish-speaking friends in the United States, Israel, and Poland. Their reaction was positive; they hate the current government as well. One of the unexpected results of the interview was that one of my friends, Krzysztof, was able to find the name of the doctor mentioned above, who against the Hippocratic Oath, had Teresa sent away, therefore saving my family. Krzysztof discovered that the doctor’s

name was Benedykt Frommer, born in 1892, educated in Vienna, a friend of Bruno Shultz, who survived the Holocaust in Drohobycz and died in 1947 in Poland. I was happy to find out the name of this Jewish “Righteous” person. Krzysztof also sent me a copy of my father’s birth certificate and copies of some other interesting documents.

I am glad that there is still a semblance of democracy in Poland that allowed thousands of viewers to hear the opinion of a survivor who cares about Poland.

To that point, I attended a very big commemoration of the 75th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In attendance was the Polish President Duda. I was heartened to see hundreds of young volunteers dispensing jonquils, the symbol of the uprising.

Maybe not everything is lost in Polish-Jewish relations.

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## Elie Wiesel

### Albert Garih

**Albert Garih was born in Paris, France. He survived the war in hiding with neighbors and in a Catholic boarding school for boys in the northeastern suburb of Montfermeil.**

**THE FIRST TIME I SAW ELIE WIESEL** was on television in France in 1967. In the wake of the Six-Day War, a French network presented a program that consisted of a screening of Otto Preminger's movie *Exodus*, based on Leon Uris's novel, followed by a debate between three Jews and three Arabs. At that time, there was so much tension between the two sides that the Arabs wouldn't even agree to sit in the same studio with the Israelis. On the Israeli side was a man who stood up and left, arguing that he had once been treated like he was subhuman in Auschwitz, and he refused to accept the same insulting treatment again. That man was Elie Wiesel, and today, 50 years later, I am still in awe of his dignity. The other two men on the Israeli side remained so that there could be a debate.

That was my first introduction to Elie Wiesel. Since then, I have read many of his books, starting with the *Jews of Silence*, in which he described the plight of the Jews in the former Soviet Union, then the trilogy (*Night, Dawn, and Day*), the two volumes of his autobiography, and a few more. I also had a chance to hear him speak some 40 years ago in a synagogue in Montreal. Since I have lived in the United States, I have witnessed his courageous political statements, whether to President Reagan about his visit to Bitburg Cemetery or to President Clinton about Bosnia, and in the few years that I have worked as a volunteer at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, I have been able to admire his monumental contribution to the creation and work of the Museum.

Finally, I happened to have been seated two seats away from him at the Museum on the day of President Obama's visit in 2012. I had a chance to approach him and exchange a few words in French, my native language and the one that he mastered so impressively as a young refugee in post-World War II France and that all his books were written in.

What has always struck me was his eloquence, how he was able to find inspiring words in every circumstance, to touch everyone who approached him, and how he commanded respect after having been denied it in the camps. He was the quintessential role model of dignity, humanity, and decency, and to me, he has been an inspiration ever since the first time I saw him briefly on that French television program.

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## Leaving Home

June 14, 1943

Agi Geva

**Agi Geva was born in Budapest, Hungary. She and her mother and sister together survived Auschwitz, Plaszow, forced labor, and a death march before being liberated by US troops in 1945.**

**IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL SUMMER MORNING** with no sign of rain so I thought it would be a good idea to go swimming at Tapolca. I phoned a few friends to join me. Even Shosha, my-12-year-old sister, wanted to come, which was unusual as she did not like to be with my friends so much.

Mother agreed after warnings to be careful in the deep water, to avoid the sun, to watch out for the boys, to not get in the water too soon after a meal, and to make sure to return before nightfall.

My sister and I got sandwiches, green peppers stuffed with white cheese, and schnitzels with chicken wings. We all met at the bus station, looking forward to a carefree, pleasant trip.

It was a beautiful place to spend time with friends: two pools between trees, with lots of young people, talking, laughing, singing, running around, and playing ping-pong.

Who would or could have thought that just one year later, on June 14, 1944, all of us would be getting into cattle cars not far from that bus station, everybody wearing a yellow star on their blouse, and starting out on a three-day journey to an unknown destination?

Could we have thought that instead of laughing, joking, planning the day, there would be crying, fainting, screaming in a cattle car?

That was our reality exactly a year later. Mother, Shosha, most of my friends, and I got off the car in a daze together with another 50 or so inhabitants of Miskolcz and entered a huge campsite, surrounded by Germans yelling at us “*los los*,” to move more quickly. We could hardly move at all, having been in a cramped position for three days without sufficient food, drink, air, and light.

We were in Auschwitz, in a killing center.

The year before, on the same day, we were swimming, laughing, joking, but that day we were prisoners. The reason? We were born Jewish.

The Germans separated the men from the women immediately on arrival. I can still hear the desperate cries and sobs of farewell.

There was not much time for grief or thought as we were moved, pushed into rows of lines to go forward to face three German officers who sent some of the women to the left or to the right side.

Mother's concerns of the year earlier were of getting into the water after a meal, but now her concerns were of life and death. The choice of the meal to take to the pool turned into having no meal at all for the previous days and no meal for many days to come.

When the line started to move forward, Mother became worried about what lay ahead. She explained that she had to take the risk of leaving us behind by going forward to see what was happening, guns or no guns. She was pale and scared when she got back.

"You should never mention that we are family," she told us. She heard girls pleading to stay with their mothers or vice versa to no avail. She understood that girls younger than 16 were sent to the left.

Mother had a few suggestions. She instructed us to say that we were 18 and 19, respectively. In order for us to look older, she told us to bind our scarves on our heads downward, under our chins and she bound her scarf the opposite way, atop her head, in order to look younger.

The year before, we definitely did not want to go anywhere with Mom, and now all we wanted was to be near her.

When we got to the end of the line and faced those Germans, we did not know that our lives were at stake, that the left side meant execution. All we wanted was for the three of us, Mom, Shosha, and me, to stay together.

I had feelings and emotions that I had never experienced before. I was in a panic and I was desperate, but when I saw Mom and Shosha on the same side I was sent, my joy and relief were overwhelming. I could not remember ever having been so happy. I saw the same joy on my mother's face. What would we have felt if we had known what we did not know at that time, that our lives had just been spared by not being sent to the left side?



On the day in 1943 when my friends and I went swimming, we all returned home together by bus, happy, tired, and content after a day of fun.

There would be no return home from Auschwitz for any of my friends. Their lives ended there.

From our group that went swimming that day, only Shosha and I survived the Holocaust.

## The Aftermath: Right after Liberation, Silence Begins

**ON APRIL 28, 1945, IN GARMISH PARTEN KIRCHEN, GERMANY,** the 179 Hungarian women had 179 opinions of their whereabouts, what to do, and where to go. My mother, sister Shosha, and I looked at one another, cried, hugged, and declared that we had made it in spite of all that we had gone through. In spite of the Nazis' intentions and efforts. We were relieved that we did not have to be part of the forced death march any more. Our strength had been spent, and we just wanted to sit down due to exhaustion. I knew that if I would have had to march for one more day, I would not have remained alive.

We were still afraid that we would fall into enemy hands. After a while, we saw a group of soldiers whom we could not identify. When we approached them, I understood that they were talking in English, since I had learned English as a child. They were Americans. They told us that they were astonished, since they had never before seen such a group of weird-looking, emaciated, ugly, bald women.

The soldiers led us to their headquarters at a nearby summer resort hotel in Plansee. I recall very little of that period, as it took me a while to reorient myself, both physically and cognitively. The Americans gave us everything that we needed, and they even suggested that we sew dresses for ourselves using the curtains in the rooms. After a few days, an American officer was going to town to shop, and he asked each of us what we had dreamt of having during the past year. He said that he would try to fulfill those wishes. Some of us wanted chocolate, others craved ice cream. Some women wanted schnitzel, and I asked for lipstick. My request surprised everybody. We had not seen a mirror image of ourselves in a long time. After I saw my reflection in the mirror, I barely recognized myself, since I was very pale, very thin, and my hair was only one centimeter in length. I thought that the lipstick would improve my appearance, even though my mother had not allowed me to use lipstick in the past.

After several weeks we had to leave the headquarters, and the officers took us to Innsbruck, where the United Restitution Offices took care of us. We stayed at the Hotel Post in Innsbruck for eight months, as we waited, thought, and planned. It took us some time to get used to having a normal life after we had been in captivity for almost a year. It felt wonderful to be free, to be able to make our own decisions, to be able to take a shower and to sleep alone in a real bed with a pillow and blanket, without waking up hungry. For a long time I would awake in the morning anticipating the barked commands of the *kapos* at Auschwitz. I was pleasantly surprised to realize that those days were over forever. I admired and appreciated the green scenery, such a profound contrast to the grayness of Auschwitz. I had regained my childhood, as I now sang together with the birds in the trees and I danced when I saw a flitting butterfly.

It was difficult for us to make decisions for the future. While we were in Innsbruck, we took day trips to town, where we went to the cinema, to local resorts, and to other places where we made new friends. The Hungarian group members seldom spoke about the events of the past year. I already felt the period of what eventually became the 50-year silence begin. I occasionally asked my mother about events that were unclear to me regarding the captivity period, but her answer was primarily one of avoidance. She did not want us to speak of the past year.

My mother, my sister, and I contemplated options for the future. We were told that we could choose any place, and we would be taken there, wherever it would be. Most members of our group left for the United States, some chose Palestine, and others went to Australia. My mother wanted us to return to Hungary so that we could find out which of our relatives had survived and were alive. We were given the necessary documents, money, and guidance in order to facilitate our journey to Budapest. I did not want to return to Hungary, to face the people who had betrayed us to the Nazis, those who still wished for our extermination. I hoped to go to a distant place, where the sun shines, without reminiscences of that dark period.

Today, 73 years after my liberation, I still recite a silent prayer of thanks to God every day for my freedom.

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## Did Your Mom Pray during the Holocaust?

**Peter Gorog**

**Peter Gorog was born in Hungary in March 1941. After his father died in a forced labor battalion, Peter and his mother survived the Holocaust living in multiple apartments and in the ghetto in Budapest.**

**“DID YOUR MOM PRAY DURING THE HOLOCAUST?”** asked an 8th-grade student after one of my presentations at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. I was surprised hearing this question, and while I tried to compose my answer, I also tried to figure out what prompted her to ask it.

I knew she was a part of a group from a Catholic private school. I also knew that prayer is very important in Christianity, and Catholics pray to specific patron saints depending on their need or activity (healing, travel, country, peace, etc.). She might have wanted to know if Jews had patron saints too, or she could have been interested in knowing if my mother’s prayers were answered and divine providence played a role in our survival.

During the presentation, I mentioned my mother’s Orthodox Jewish upbringing and practices before World War II. I also talked earlier about my great-grandfather, who was a rabbi in a small town, and about my grandfather, who studied to be a rabbi but later chose a secular trade.

I was almost four years old when the Soviet Red Army liberated the Budapest ghetto, so my personal memories are very thin about our life during the Holocaust. However, my mother’s prayer every night when she tucked me into bed is one thing I remember very well. Her gentle voice and the beautiful melody are seared in my memory. So much so, that I was not even three when I knew the Shema by heart. It is one of the most sacred prayers in Jewish liturgy, and I knew it in Hebrew. This traditional Jewish prayer is chanted twice a day, when one wakes up and before one goes to bed. Although I could fluently chant this prayer, even if it was out of tune, I could not understand one word. Actually it took me another 40 years to learn what this prayer was about.

I told all of this in my response, and I put it into context of the Holocaust. I told the audience that this was also the last prayer observant Jews recited before they entered the gas chambers.

I also told them that when the Holocaust was over, my mom stopped praying, stopped observing Jewish traditions, stopped lighting the Sabbath candles on Friday nights, and stopped going to synagogue, except for Yom Kippur to say kaddish for my father. This is a prayer for our loved ones who are not with us anymore. We fasted on Yom Kippur, but my mother never told me why. She turned away from religion after the Holocaust, as many survivors did who could not reconcile their loss with a benevolent G-d.

I finished my response with a “happy ending.” I told the young lady that my mother started to pray again and lit the Shabbat candles after she visited me here in the United States and saw, that after 40 some years, I had returned to the faith of my parents and grandparents. This last comment might have been the answer the young Catholic girl was waiting for. She might have been relieved, and her faith might even have been reinforced by knowing that my mother found G-d again in spite of all the horrors of the Holocaust.

There is a very touching story about the Shema and its significance in the life of Jewish people. The story is about some Jewish children who survived the Holocaust in convents and monasteries in the care of nuns and priests. Many of the parents did not survive, and Jewish organizations tried to identify the surviving children who might have had living relatives.

While in the care of Catholic institutions, they were brought up in the tradition of the Catholic church. After the war was over, the church was very reluctant to turn the children over to Jewish charities. They claimed that they took care of Jewish and non-Jewish orphans, with little or no documentation. Even their Jewish-sounding names could not necessarily prove that they were Jewish.

It happened at one of the orphanages that the representatives of the Jewish organizations started chanting the Shema in the dorm. Their thinking was that if Jewish parents had raised the children in their first few years of life, the survivors most likely had memorized the Shema and their mothers’ voices, just like I had. They hoped that the children would recognize the familiar tunes. It worked! One by one the Jewish children started shouting “Mama,” “Momma,” “Mamushka,” each in their native language, and they joined the chorus of voices. After many years of separation, they still remembered the words, the tune, and the love and comfort their mothers provided during those dark times.

## Enduring Melodies

**IF SOMEONE COULD GRANT ME ONE WISH**, I would ask, without hesitation, for perfect pitch. The people I envy are the ones who can play music by ear. I love music and would love to be able to play an instrument, any instrument. Although if a second request would be honored, my choice of instrument would be cello or maybe clarinet.

Unfortunately, I am tone deaf. I can hear music perfectly well, at least I think I can, I just can't sing. I instantly recognize if someone sings or plays out of tune, but I cannot repeat any pitch I hear.

From my earliest memories, music has always been an important part of my life. The first tune I can remember is one of the most well-known prayers in Jewish liturgy, the Shema. It's a custom of Jewish mothers to sing it to their babies every night when they tuck them in bed. So did my mother, even amidst the most horrific times in our life during the Holocaust. Interestingly enough, according to some experts, I sing the Shema today with a perfect pitch. Maybe 70+ years of practice does the trick.

When I grew up in Communist Hungary, there were music classes in elementary school, but all we did was sing Hungarian folksongs. I attended an all-boys school, so when 25 prepubescent boys sang at the same time, no one noticed that I could not carry a tune. I only got into trouble when there was a tryout for choir and I had to sing solo. After the first few notes, the class burst into laughter as I was so off tune. The teacher gave me two other opportunities, but my singing just got worse. Because the laughter got louder and louder, the teacher assumed that I was mocking her so she sent me to the principal's office. When I told the principal what had happened, he asked me to sing the same song. After the first few notes he realized that I had no talent in singing, so he walked me back to the class and told the music teacher that I was born without any musical talent. I never had to try out for choir again.

Schools in Hungary after World War II had no instruments; there were no school orchestras. We were very poor. My mom could not afford to buy even a recorder, which I assume is one of the cheapest instruments. Earlier in my life I wanted to be a world famous accordion player. Of course even if someone had donated an accordion to us, we could not afford a private music teacher.

My first fascination with classical music started when I was in ninth grade. Our math teacher was an old-fashioned gentleman. He was born in the 1880s, he wore a bow tie all the time, and he even had a very ornate walking stick. I cannot recall the reason, but he frequently sang the opening notes of Beethoven's 5th symphony. Ta-ta-ta-taa, Ta-ta-ta-taa. It had something to do with algebra

or maybe with integrals or calculus. So when I first heard the real symphony on the radio, I fell in love with it. Ever since then, when I hear this music, I close my eyes and I am back in ninth grade, sitting next to my friend Domokos.

While in college, my musical preference was jazz. It was very popular, and although it was the music of the “decaying capitalism,” as the Communist propaganda tried to make us believe, it was tolerated. Not like the rock ‘n’ roll and Elvis, which were banned for a while. Hungarian music stores did not sell records of Western musicians, but one could buy them on the black market for the weekly salary of an average worker. In the ‘60s everyone was an average worker in Hungary; a doctor’s salary was the same as the gas station attendant’s salary. Their real income was quite different, but the corruption and black market activities in Communist countries belong to another story.

Fast forward to July 1980, when I defected to the United States. The first musical event I attended was an Ella Fitzgerald and Ray Charles double concert at Pier Six Pavilion in Baltimore. I thought I had died and gone to heaven, almost literally. While still in Hungary I knew about them. I had their records, but they were like demigods whom I never thought I would see personally. There they were alive and well. The experience was so overwhelming that all of my fear of my still uncertain future evaporated. I was in a new country. I hardly knew the language. I still did not have a job. But who cared when you could hear Ella and Ray live?

My next musical epiphany came a few months later when I heard Mstislav Rostropovich at the Kennedy Center playing the Cello Concerto by Antonín Dvořák. If the Baltimore concert was heaven, this was nirvana. By hearing the world’s best cello player ever, according to me, playing the best cello piece ever, again according to me, my defection was fully justified. It also helped that by that time I had a job. I had my first apartment and my first brand-new car that I had bought with a \$10 down payment. That’s correct, TEN dollars as a down payment.

Classical music played a very significant role in finding my future wife. The year was 1984, yes the famous 1984, and I was at a summer retreat with my synagogue somewhere in Pennsylvania. One day between programs I was walking in the corridors of a building at the college campus where we stayed, and I heard someone playing Sergei Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto. It was not perfect, as if someone was learning it. I entered the room and there she was, young, beautiful, and playing Rachmaninoff without sheet music. I was impressed. Precious little did I know about her, but she immediately jumped to the top of my list of potential wife candidates. The piano player, Jorgy Walker, and I got married on March 9, 1986.

# WHAT YOU DO MATTERS: A Letter to My Family

## MY LOVED ONES,

I have been planning for a while to share with you some of the emails, cards, and Facebook postings I receive after I lead a tour at the Museum or give a speaking engagement. I have been reluctant to share the feedback because it might seem boastful, like I'm bragging or self-aggrandizing. I only got over my reluctance very recently after the Kennedy Center cast of *An American in Paris* (more than 30 people!) came to the Museum and another survivor, Marty Weiss, and I gave them a tour. They were the most attentive and responsive group I have ever led on a tour. They were the friendliest, most down-to-earth people you have ever met, without any celebrity attitude.

Sharing excerpts from the Facebook posting of Matthew (Matt) Scott, who played one of the major roles (Adam Hochberg, the Jewish character), might seem self-serving, but so be it. I am doing it with tears in my eyes. I have gotten many compliments, thank-you notes after my presentations, but this one stands out. It is special because Matt conveys so eloquently how our work at the Museum affects the lives of our visitors and audiences.

As you know, I always finish my presentation at the Museum or at schools, universities, and synagogues, by quoting and elaborating on the Museum's motto:

## NEVER AGAIN: WHAT YOU DO MATTERS

As you may recall, the "YOU" in the motto is bolded as a reminder that the "YOU" includes everyone who visits the Holocaust Memorial Museum or hears the testimonies of the ever-decreasing population of survivors. My purpose is that the last words the audience hears and hopefully remembers will resonate with them and will prompt them to stand up against discrimination and hatred.

My dear ones, as you read Matt's comments, you will understand that the cast not only heard us, but their experiences at the Museum deeply affected what "THEY DO," namely, their performance in a show that is set in post-Holocaust Paris.

Here are some of Matt's thoughts. There are no bold letters in the original.

... While in DC, we were given a guided tour of the Holocaust Museum by two survivors, Marty and Peter. For two hours, these beautiful men shared their stories, knowledge, and first-hand experience of the most horrific event in our world's history. Their individual stories are remarkable, Peter and his family

were saved by Wallenberg, and Marty survived the final year of the war at Auschwitz. In the years that followed, **they made a conscious decision to choose kindness and love instead of hatred.** They vowed to share their stories so that others would know the truth. . . .

What can you do for men like this? How do you show your appreciation, your gratitude? It was a small gesture, but the entire company brought them to our final performance of *An American in Paris* at The Kennedy Center. Never before were we so aware of whom we were performing for. I know I was. As I spoke the opening words, **“For four years, the city of light went dark. Violence and swastikas in the street. Martial law and fear in people’s eyes.”** As we tap danced our way through “Stairway to Paradise,” a banner of Marlene Dietrich was standing in the foreground. And when the words came out of my mouth, those words I’ve written here so often, **“Life is already so dark. If you have got the talent to make it brighter, to give people joy and hope, why would you withhold that?”** Well, it all became clear. **What we do matters.** And we do have the ability to bring people joy, to bring a little light into this ever darkening world. We are not insignificant, we are great. **Our words and our actions have consequences.** . . .

We are still a great country. It is not too late for us. We can turn the tide. We can correct our mistakes. We can open up our doors and help those who need our help. **Had we turned a blind eye all those years ago, Marty and Peter would not be here. And I simply cannot imagine a world without them in it.**

My dear ones, this last sentence was the one that brought tears in my eyes. Borrowing from Matt’s thoughts, my hope is for all of you that you recognize that your words and your actions have consequences. When you feel that life is dark, when you see fear in people’s eyes, I hope you will make a conscious decision to choose kindness and love instead of hatred. You all have what it takes to make life brighter, and I hope that you will give people joy and hope. Just as it became clear for Matt, you too will also recognize, that:

#### **WHAT YOU DO MATTERS.**

With love,  
Apu

*P.S. If you read this letter and you are not family, Apu means Dad in Hungarian. :)*

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## Rex—A Pet?

Julie Keefer

**During the Holocaust, Julie Keefer and her family hid in a bunker in a forest, and later Julie posed as a family friend's niece at a home in Lwów, Poland, where she had been born.**

**IT IS EARLY SPRING OF 1944. I AM THREE YEARS OLD** and living in the home of the Schwarczynskis at 78 St. Sophia Street in Lwów, Poland. My pretend “aunt,” Lucia Nowicka—the Polish Catholic woman who saved my life—is their live-in housekeeper. Rex is the Schwarczynskis’ dog. I cannot really call Rex a pet; he is a guard dog—a huge and ferocious German shepherd. His sharp white teeth and the drool from his mouth glisten in the sun. He barks at Nazis. Because the Nazi governor lives next door to the Schwarczynskis and has Nazi guards and soldiers lined up at his front door, Rex barks constantly. His bark is a deep-throated, menacing growl. Even the Schwarczynskis are intimidated by him. He is kept outdoors on a metal chain. His food and water are shoved to him with a long pole.

Lucia is busy all day, cooking, cleaning, and tending to an old, sway-backed horse and a skinny pig. My six-month-old sister, Tola, “my baby,” is already gone. I am told that a doctor took her to a hospital to make her “all better”; she has not come back yet. I am lonely, so I decide to befriend Rex. As I approach him, Lucia, who is watching me, is about to scream and run after me, but Mrs. Schwarczynski calms her and stops her from coming after me and exciting Rex. I pat Rex and hug his thick neck. He begins licking me with his long, pink tongue. I get on his back.

We become inseparable. He is no longer chained up outside. He starts to sleep on the floor next to my bed. Now, I do not know if this is pure memory on my part, or if Lucia told it to me, or both.

I am sleeping in a bed with a short ladder attached to it. Perhaps it is a crib with a side that can be raised and lowered. I’m not sure which it is. I just remember Rex lurching up and grabbing my pajama top and shaking me awake. Then, somehow, I get on his back, as he takes me out of that room and toward the front door. As I ride on him, I see bright bursts of light and begin to choke on thick smoke. I cover my ears with my hands to block out the loud crashes and bangs nearby. I am shaking. My hands are cold and clammy. I am afraid. I get off Rex, my heart pounding, my

blood rushing. Rex places his huge, furry body right next to my chest as though he's trying to calm me. Finally, my heartbeats become slower and my blood stops rushing. I feel safe. Much later, I am told that a bomb fell right on the spot where my crib had been. Rex saved my life.

How did Rex know that the bomb would fall right where it did? How did he manage to get me out of danger? How did he know that plopping his huge, furry chest next to me would calm me?

Rex was a fierce guard dog. When any Nazi approached the house, it was my job to take Rex under the kitchen table, which was covered with a long tablecloth. I was to hide there with him and keep him calm, not allowing him to bark, or worse, bite a Nazi, as he had once done. Were the Schwarczynskis trying to protect Rex or me? Did they suspect that I was really a Jewish child and not Lucia's Polish Catholic niece, as she claimed?

## Visit to L'viv: Janowska

**OCTOBER 15, 2013, WAS THE FIRST TIME** I had stepped on the soil of L'viv in 68 years. I was born here in 1941. I was hidden here—first in a bunker in the barn of my *dziadzio* (grandpa in Polish), next in a tunnel bunker in the Borszczowice Forest, along with 30 or so other Jews. Later, I was hidden in the home of the Schwarczynskis, a retired Polish Catholic engineer and his wife. I was the “niece” of their housekeeper, Lucia Nowicka (later she became my *babcia*, or grandmother).

L'viv has been the subject of my nightmares for many of those 68 years. I remember Jews in uncovered trucks, some dead, some dying, their moans and cries filling the air, their metallic-smelling blood splattered on the cobblestones. I remember seeing black, thick smoke streaming in the air; hearing sirens screaming; tripping on broken slabs of concrete; encountering buildings razed to rubble. The vinegary smell of fear permeating the atmosphere.

So why did I return to L'viv—this unmarked grave of my people—at the age of 72? First of all, I wanted to retrace my *dziadzio*'s steps. He described our lives from 1941 to 1948 in his diary. I always wondered how many of his own horrible experiences could be corroborated by others and how much of what I saw would rekindle my own memories. I also hoped to find some trace of my baby sister, Tola Weinstock, whose name had been changed to Antonina Nowicka, which was Catholic sounding, to save her life. *Dziadzio* told no one that she was a Jewish child when he placed her in Dr. Groer's orphanage at the age of six months.

Perhaps I also wanted to grapple with my own demons. Why did I survive when so many, more worthy people did not? Why was I not one of the six million who were slain simply for being Jewish?

To tell a little about our visit, I will begin with our sojourn to Janowska, where my dziadzio had been imprisoned. My husband, Larry; Alex, our native guide; Andrew, our driver; and I set off on our trip. It is a sunny but chilly day. Leaves of yellow and rust carpet the ground. Alex, whose English is fluent, has a copy of our itinerary. The sites we have selected to visit were culled from Dziadzio's diary. Alex, Larry, and I are seated in a white van. Andrew is a magician who navigates two-way narrow cobblestone streets impossibly jammed with cars, buses, and pedestrians. He understands and speaks few words of English, but he is kind and considerate. He helps me get on and off the high step leading to my front passenger seat in the van. Seat belts are not the custom here, and I fear that wearing one would insult Andrew's driving talents.

We drive to the infamous concentration camp, Janowska. Most of the camp itself was razed by the Russians after the war and rebuilt as a prison. The Ukrainians have retained it as a prison. We can not enter, nor can we even take photos of the prison itself; it would be a breach of security to do so. But there is a road nearby where Andrew can park, and we can walk around.

Janowska Prison is a large compound squatting on the top of a tall, flat-topped hill. We glimpse tumbledown buildings, some short and made of dirty bricks with tiny, broken window panes. A large edifice with a tall chimney spews billows of thick, black smoke that the wind carries away. From 1941 to 1943, people reported the smoke often reeked of charred human flesh from victims who were shot and then taken to the back to be burned, to save a trip to the Belzec gas chambers.

Today's black smoke smells innocently of burning wood. The entire compound is encircled by 30-foot-high barbed-wire walls with cylinders of razor wire on top. Janowska Prison presents a menacing facade, but it looms as a mere shadow of its concentration camp ancestor.

On the right side, but outside the barbed wire, partially hidden by a dirty white concrete wall, stands a rundown three-story, white- and mustard-colored concrete edifice. This structure is all that remains of the original Janowska. At that time, the building was located inside the camp itself; now it stands outside the prison. It has four balconies, three of which have been enclosed for year-round usage. One remains an open balcony.

Tall trees with multicolored leaves swell their branches. Dark-green bushes surround a closely cropped, patchy lawn strewn with maroon, orange, and yellow foliage. Clotheslines with dark, faded work pants, frayed shirts, and grayish underwear suspended from them swing gently in the breeze.



Julie Keefer stands outside a structure from the Janowska concentration camp. *Courtesy of Julie Keefer*

This dwelling is now an apartment building; it too looks innocent of its dreadful past. But from 1941 to 1943, it was the home of the Nazi commandant, Willhaus, and his deputy, Rokitin. On one of those balconies, Rokitin would stand and yell for a head count. If he did not like the way a prisoner was standing or the way his Jewish star patches were sewn on his armbands or trousers, he would shoot that prisoner in the head.

To the right of the apartment is a dusty, pitted road. Alex, Larry, and I begin to climb the incline that leads to the top of the hill. One set of tracks meanders to the top of the hill.

“These very tracks held tram cars crammed with hundreds of prisoners being transported to the Janowska camp to replace those who had been killed,” Alex tells us. There was a gate in the electrified barbed wire at the top of the hill, with a tall sentry post, where the new prisoners were herded in, forced to give up their clothing, and issued threadbare shirts, pants, and old shoes.

Dziadzio described the “welcome.” “We were taunted with names like ‘filthy Jew,’ ‘dirty pig,’ and were beaten. As we entered, we saw tall, concrete posts with men being hung upside down to expire in agony. One of them was a friend of mine.”

Today there is no more electrified wire. No more concrete pillars. Now there is simply an enclosed wooden shelter for sentries. As I tread this road, words from my dziadzio’s diary transport me back to 1941–42, when he was a prisoner here. On the right side is a broken sidewalk, behind which are houses and apartment buildings. Some are new. Some are the ugly, gray, cinder block, functional dwellings typical of Soviet architecture in L’viv.

Some houses appear old, as if they might have been standing from 1941 to 1943, when Janowska was a concentration camp. I wonder to myself, what did the residents of those homes see? Hear? Smell? What did they do—if anything—when so many atrocities were being committed less than 50 feet from their front door? What did they think? Feel?

We continue climbing. At the top of the hill, on the right, beyond the residences, a steep, wooded incline with a ladder-like set of steps leads to a cemetery.

Alex points in that direction. “Since the 1850s, this was the site of the ‘new’ Jewish cemetery, built when the old one dating from the 1500s was full,” he says. “Nazis had all the gravestones removed and chopped up. They used the pieces to pave roads.”

I trudge downhill slowly, kicking pebbles as I go. My shoulders are slumped; my head is down. I can barely breathe. Larry places his arm around me and pulls me close. We follow Alex downhill to the van. The three of us get into the van, and Andrew drives us on the main road past the prison itself. He turns right, into a small pull-off not visible from the road. Andrew parks the van, and all four of us get out. We see a huge sign above a sky-blue bench with the following words penned by the writer and poet Dr. Abraham Schwartz. The sign was translated into English and read:

Passer-by, Stop! Bow Your Head

In front you see a spot of the former Janowska death camp. The ground is moaning. Here the innocent victims were tortured and tormented; here they were executed and sent to gas chambers!

May the memory of the innocently murdered live forever! Eternal malediction be upon executioners!

In front of us, to the left side of some open metal gates, is a huge, eight-ton stone. It has a large Star of David etched into the number 200,000, with the star separating the third and fourth digits. Something is written in Ukrainian at the top, Hebrew in the middle, and English at the bottom. It is hard to decipher the words, as garlands of beribboned plastic flowers cover most of the English. It seems to read, “Let the memory of all the Nazi genocide victims at the Janowska death camp remain forever.”

I spot an old man huddled into a coat two sizes too large for him. A raggedy woolen cap adorns his weathered, wrinkled face. His hands, in cloth gloves with holes, expose bare, gnarled fingers clasping a broom made of twigs tied together. He is sweeping leaves away from the sky-blue bench. At its far right edge is an open can of blue paint, a paintbrush lying across the top. He seems to have touched up the bench. Alex asks the man in Ukrainian, “Who pays you to do this sweeping and painting?”

“Nobody. I just do it.”

Near Alex is a middle-aged woman, five-foot-two, her short hair dyed a vivid crimson. Her polyester, violet-colored, clingy shirt exposes several layers of “love handles.” Her face is round, her eyes a faded blue. She gestures toward the old man and tells Alex, “He comes here often to clean up. I see him every time I come here. He’s here all the time. He even comes in rain and snow.”

Alex explains to her why we Americans are here. “Her grandfather was a prisoner here in Janowska,” he explains to her in rapid Ukrainian. Gesturing to me, he adds, “She was born here in L’viv but left for America as a child.”

The woman points to the sign. Her eyes fill up. “They are blessed. Remember, they are in heaven. I live in that apartment building right near the prison. I hear chilling, ghostly sounds all the time. Terrible things were done by the Nazis who lived there. It’s hard to sleep peacefully in that house. But I live there to be near my son, who is locked up in that prison.”

She begins to weep, approaches me, and throws her arms around me. I, too, choke up. I clutch her to my chest. I pat her back and say, “I’m so sorry for your pain.”

She replies, “Remember, they are in heaven.” Alex translates her Ukrainian for me and my English for her. We do not understand each other’s words, but we feel each other’s sorrow.

The Nazis tried to erase all traces of the Jews. In L’viv, they almost succeeded. Two hundred thousand were slain in Janowska alone. Even graves dating back to the 1500s were desecrated. Headstones were smashed.

Today, as I enter cemeteries, I look with yearning, my eyes filled with unshed tears, when I see monuments to other people’s heritage. Where is a memorial to mine?

Perhaps my own heritage is not etched in granite or marble. It is the loving memory of my dziadzio that I cherish in my heart. He was my rock and my hero. When the world around me was shattering during World War II, he protected me. He was larger than life. He evaded death at Jaktarow. He escaped from Janowska and led a resistance in the Borszczowice Forest. He helped save my life and showered me with unconditional love at a time when love was scarce. He survived the war with his soul intact. He, who lost everything and almost everyone, could dance and sing and talk constantly about how lucky he was. “I hef you, Yulitska. I hef Larry, I hef Steef, I hef Mona. You are my million dollars. I am a rich man.”

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## A Special Moment

### Louise Lawrence-Israëls

**Louise Lawrence-Israëls was born in Haarlem, Netherlands, and survived the war by hiding on the fourth floor of a row house in Amsterdam.**

**SIDNEY AND I LEFT FOR ISRAEL** to celebrate the bar and bat mitzvah of two of our grandchildren, Benjamin and Rebekah: a joyous occasion and hopefully a learning experience. Our daughter Naomi did not finalize the ceremony of coming of age for her children until about eight months before. Neither of the children have any Jewish education, and they do not belong to a synagogue. Frankly, I think she made the arrangements to please her parents and especially me, with my background.

Our other daughters, Judith and Jordana, also went.

I would love it if the children could love Israel like Sidney and I do, and I hope they will understand how Israel came to exist and why it has the right to exist. We took the family to Yad Vashem, the memorial to the Holocaust in Jerusalem.

We arrived in Israel in pouring rain. That is a very lucky sign. Israel has a severe water shortage. Many people pray for rain in the fall. Our driver “flew” to Jerusalem with us; I do not think his wheels touched the road, but we arrived safely. The moment we stepped into the hotel, Sidney and I looked at each other and we whispered: home.

We settled in, and about an hour later the eight of us met at the lobby for tea and coffee. Sidney took the family to see the two paintings that were hanging in the lobby of the hotel, made by my ancestor Jozef Israels. My father was named for him.

We talked, we laughed, and we made plans for the next two days.

We would be meeting at Yad Vashem at two o'clock in the afternoon.

A guide who specialized in leading tours for children met our family at the visitor center. We started with the Children's Memorial and then we spent almost two hours at the museum. It was so good to watch the children; they gave the guide their full attention. It was almost dark when we reached the end of the exhibit. Lights were being lit at the houses and buildings of the Mount of Remembrance. That view always moves us, but it was even better with the lights.

Our last stop at Yad Vashem was the little synagogue.

I had done research at home and found the names of two of my relatives, a boy and a girl, who had been murdered in the Holocaust. They had only reached the ages of four and nine. I never knew them.

Two tired children sat in the synagogue and listened to me, their grandmother. I explained that it was not just Ben and Bekah during their bar and bat mitzvah, Johan and Astrid Israels would be standing with them.

I gave Ben and Bekah the scrolls of remembrance and told them that Israel was built on the ashes of these relatives and six million others who were murdered. I think about this all the time and hope they will remember that very special moment.

## The Staircase

**IN THE LAST EIGHT MONTHS BEFORE WE WERE LIBERATED**, plane traffic over Holland increased a lot. Most planes were bombers originating in Germany, flying over Holland to reach England to bomb British cities. Or our Allies came from England and also flew over Holland to reach Germany and bomb German cities.

There were other planes also. The Nazis had made a deal with Sweden, one of the few countries in Europe that was neutral during the war. Northern Europe was experiencing one of the harshest winters ever, and there was little food for most of the people; of course, the Nazis were well fed. Planes from Sweden flew over northern Europe to drop food parcels, mostly white bread. "Swedish white bread" has always been a phrase in my vocabulary because of my years growing up in Holland.

To be on the safe side, when a plane approached Dutch air space, a piercing alarm would sound. Very much like the alarms that go off every month when the fire stations near our home test their alarm system. When the alarm would sound, it was a warning for all citizens to go to air



raid shelters. The shelters were mostly underground, in basements. People would stay in those shelters until a second alarm would sound, the all-clear alarm. That meant that the planes had passed the area.

Neither the Allies nor the Nazis had plans to bomb Holland during that time, but the planes shook a lot, and occasionally a bomb would get loose and fall on the wrong place.

Where could a family in hiding go? Nobody was supposed to know where they were. To appear all of a sudden, with or without wearing a yellow star, you just could not risk it, and you did not know whom you could trust. To stay put in your hiding place was another risk. My parents had heard that the safest place in an Amsterdam row house was in the stairwell. You can remodel the house, but you would always leave the stairs. So when the air-raid alarm would sound, we went out of the fourth-floor door and sat on the stairs till the all-clear alarm would sound.

Our move went like this, my brother would take my hand and we would walk to the door and wait. My mom would take a special basket with necessities like emergency food and warm clothes for the children. The basket was always ready. My dad and Selma would take some blankets. Then my dad would open the door, and we would quietly leave the apartment and sit on the steep stairs. As soon as the second alarm sounded, we would tiptoe back into the hiding place, and my dad would close the door.

These alarms went off very often, even during the night. My brother knew what to do; we never questioned it but followed the instructions silently.

When the war was over, we never asked why this routine had stopped; we just understood that when peace had arrived, the danger of the planes flying over our city had stopped.

When we walked through Amsterdam after liberation, we saw bombed-out houses with the staircases still standing.

I often wonder today, had a bomb fallen on our house, would the staircase still be standing, would we would have had the roof on top of our heads, would we still have survived? Would we be alive?

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## Onward to America: A New World

### Michel Margosis

**Born in Brussels, Belgium, Michel Margosis spent the war in hiding on a farm in France, and in Marseille, and eventually escaped over the Pyrenees into Spain.**

**THE CHILDREN BOARDED THE TRAIN** and they all began chattering even as the wheels began to turn. The train made a stop in Madrid to collect several additional children. Some of the young passengers had been with me at the *Hospicio* (orphanage) in Gerona and in Caldas de Malavella, and it was good to see Georges again. Jacques Rusman, a Southern French Jew from the city of Montauban, came aboard in Madrid along with Daniel Rosenberg. Other children that were placed with the group included Georgette and Pauline Wolman, as well as Israel and Rachel Lucas.

The train ride to Lisbon was uneventful, but as soon as we arrived, Father was waiting by the rail station to greet me. I had not seen him in nearly three years, for he had been in Caldas da Rainha, a small town about 55 miles north of Lisbon. He was there sometime after Vichy became the capital of unoccupied France. Initially, after arrival in Portugal, Father resided in the city of Lisbon, but as the war went on and the volumes of rescued or fleeing refugees swelled, Caldas da Rainha and Ericeira were set up as refugee centers for the duration.

One moment of time, which I recall with my eyes welling with tears and my heart racing, is when I gave my father a small package of cookies that only my mother could bake. Those cookies could likely bruise a toe if one fell on it, yet tasted rather good, particularly with Russian tea. He just opened the package slowly and stared at the contents, then longingly admired and tenderly kissed each cookie before slowly eating them. It wasn't until November 1944 that mother found a way to hire a *passeur* to smuggle her, this time into Portugal to rejoin her husband, my father. By then, my sister Anna had just sailed to Palestine pursuing Benjamin Bennoun, a beau she had fallen for in Marseille and met again in Barcelona. My father suggested that my older brother Willy should chaperone his sister, and they left the European continent from Cadiz on the 26th of November 1944 on the SS *Guiné*. The ship carried 175 young Jewish refugees who had illegally crossed the Pyrénées and were sponsored by Youth Aliyah (Child Rescue) subsidized to a significant extent by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and Jewish Agency. Although they legally moored in the port of Haifa in Palestine on the 5th of November 1944, they were greeted by the

British police and dutifully taken to the Atlit detainee camp. This camp was located about 20 kilometers (12.4 miles) south of Haifa on the Mediterranean coast. This former British military camp served as a detention center for illegal Jewish immigrants who had sought refuge in Palestine during the British Mandate in the 1930s and 1940s. At that time too, British authorities rigorously limited Jewish immigration and refused to allow Jews to enter the country.

Properly documented, Anna eventually moved to Beth Hachaluzot in Tel Aviv, where she was able to enter the world of fashion design and compete in the world of haute-couture which she had learned in Marseille. Willy first moved to Kibbutz Amir in the Upper Galilee, actually established during the war by Polish and Lithuanian immigrants. Subsequently, he relocated to a French-speaking kibbutz, Neve Ilan, 15 kilometers (9.3 miles) from Jerusalem and 50 kilometers (31 miles) from Tel Aviv, where he became a truck driver. The Jewish National Fund purchased the land at Neve Ilan at the urging of David Ben-Gurion in order to establish a “Kibbutz Army Post” that would defend the road to Jerusalem and engage in agriculture. Life in Neve Ilan was difficult: water was brought by truck on a weekly basis, nights were dark, and there was no electricity. Little by little, they discovered that it was not easy to make a living from agriculture. At the end of November 1947, the Arabs cut off the road to Jerusalem and the Jewish Agency responded by organizing caravans to bring food to the besieged city.

Back in Portugal, my father believed I had matured, and as he showed me around Lisbon, he exclaimed, “You are a big boy now!” and offered me a cigarette and a light. He bought me a fedora and we paraded along many of the city’s wide and well-kept, tree-lined avenues. We’d stopped at a café for a pause now and then and just strutted around like two grown men. I stayed with him for five days, and we strolled through town and the park, went to a movie, and talked and talked at length about everything. Our conversations ranged from the war, the history of Portugal, and the earthquake in Lisbon in the 17th century to the study of Hebrew, Yiddish, and the Torah. Yet, he was also very mindful about expanding my intellect in America. My father turned over to me four or five rare old volumes of the Bible in Latin with footnotes and commentaries in Greek and Hebrew. He believed them to be valuable and thought I might be able to sell them in the United States for a very good price to a collector, or possibly to Cardinal Spellman of New York or one of his cohort. We also attended a movie that impressed and stirred both of us, *Watch on the Rhine*, with Paul Lucas as a new immigrant to the United States who gets highly emotional about defending his new country from enemies within. It was simply marvelous and glorious to be with him and to have him all to myself, just the two of us, for those five days before I embarked for America. Furthermore, as an omen of good fortune, the sun shone even more brilliantly during my stay in Lisbon, especially on the day of departure.

As an aside, on a leisure trip to Mexico in 1989, Anna and her husband, André, met the Comte Armand de La Rochefoucauld, Duc de Doudeauville, who was pictured in one group photo taken with my father in January of 1943 in Caldas da Rainha, where the duke was also given refuge. Refugees from eastern Europe actually built the synagogue in Caldas da Rainha, and I learned fairly recently that Father served as acting rabbi for the community until 1946, when he left. Trying to find out more about his Portuguese experience, I wrote to the American Sephardi Federation and was able to connect with a member who had actually lived in Caldas da Rainha. When I asked him if he knew a Mr. Margosis, a Mr. Isaac Margosis, he replied that yes, he knew a Rabbi Margosis, and when he briefly described the man, I realized it was my father:

I think that I saw it mentioned by Captain Barros Basto, the leader of the Marranos, in Oporto, about whom I wrote a biography. If I am not mistaken, it was about a visit that your father made to the synagogue in Oporto and a subsequent visit of the Captain to Caldas. I am writing this only from memory, but what occurs to me is that Barros Basto mentioned Mr. Margosis as being the leader of the Hassidic temporary congregation in Caldas.

I believe my father served as a rabbi when I visited in 1943, though he never mentioned it. I am not at all surprised that he did serve as a rabbi because (1) he was educated by the maven Bialik and (2) because my father went often out of his way to help friends and his people. Case in point, he had written editorials to alert his readers to the Bolshevik and Nazi perils. Evidently refugees were not allowed to work in Portugal and were presumably subsidized by the JDC while pursuing intellectual activities. It was during that time that he studied and acquired a greater knowledge of French, Portuguese, and English.

After visiting my father, I boarded the *Serpa Pinto*, a fairly small Portuguese steamship that looked like it had been retrofitted to take on some passengers as well as freight. I presume it took on no more than 40 to 50 passengers and a big load of cork, a major commodity exported from Portugal. It seemed to me that better than half of the passengers, actually 21, belonged to our group and most of these were Jewish children. The ship put out to sea on the 29th of May 1943 with a stop of several hours in Oporto to load a cargo of the reputed local wine. Then, we moved on again to the open seas. Our group kept us fairly busy with morning and evening exercises and games of every type, including shuffleboard, chess, and checkers. They even had ballroom dancing on occasion, although I do not recall any live bands or any of the children dancing. We made another stop and anchored offshore in the Azores, where native lads swarmed about and would dive competitively alongside the ship to catch coins that some passengers tossed overboard one at a time, in order to enjoy the sport. Some young lads hawked pineapples for sale from small boats loaded with fruits, and as my mouth began to water from the thought of feasting, I bought two large pineapples.

I waited patiently for two days for the appropriate degree of ripening at which time I peeled and cut into one of the fruits, broke it into pieces and with juice dripping all over, I devoured it. It was the most succulent and delicious fruit I recall ever consuming, and as I wiped my mouth, I began carving the second one and ate up that one too. When I had completed the job, I got up slowly and wobbled off. The pineapples had ripened so well that the fermented juices had actually made me tipsy, but I had no trouble at all sleeping it off.

Some days the sea was so absolutely calm we called it a sea of oil, and we could not discern the faintest ripple in the water, especially in the early mornings. After supper, we would often gaze into the waters, looking mainly for flying fish, as they would soar alongside the boat. At one point, perhaps at the halfway point in the Atlantic, a young lad from our group noticed a distant pinpoint metallic reflection in the water and informed an officer of the ship, who quickly disappeared below. He reappeared on the bridge shortly afterwards with the captain. The reflection soon became more distinct, actually a periscope that slowly surfaced atop a submarine marked with large black iron crosses alongside. The steamer slowed down to an eventual stop, and uniformed men from the U-boat boarded us. The officers accompanied by the protective crew of armed sailors disappeared for an interminable hour or so. Everyone else remained standing on the deck until we suddenly heard a splash, then quiet again. The ship's officers reappeared as the captain observed the German navy leave just as efficiently as they had appeared. Apparently, the only disturbance was that soft splash and as we found out later, the mysterious disappearance of one cook.

The ship resumed its voyage and completed it uneventfully. Meanwhile, Jacques Rusman and I enjoyed the cream puffs, éclairs, and other pastries served at teatimes so much that we plotted to minimize their consumption by others. Just before teatime, the two of us would amble around in a frenzied seasickness dance toward the rail and await reactions. The display was contagious because we could return to our table with less competition and the enhanced teatime compensation. We experienced a very rewarding gastronomic treat on that ship, and that somehow, for me, became a partial beginning of a reward for the hunger I had experienced in France for such a long time.

Jacques, my partner in crime, was nicknamed Marius because he enjoyed telling long tales and jokes based on the two legendary Marseille characters Marius and Olive. One of the activities we participated in was an attempt at learning English, but it was futile within the span of time we were on ship. Richard, a senior member of the youths, was reputed to know the language well, and together we evaluated the Americanization of first names of individuals in the group. I participated, but finally decided that Michael, Mike, or Mitchell seemed too strange to me,

thus I retained my name as Michel, pronounced mee-SHELL. I must admit that my first name still causes minor snags once in a while, but I emphasize that missing a terminal “e” alters its gender. Any unsolicited mail addressed to Miss Michel is unceremoniously tossed as trash.

Some 3,450 miles later and 24 days after leaving Lisbon, we docked on American shores on June 22, 1943. The waters and the air were swarming with seafaring vessels below and a cluster of airships, blimps, and balloons. These were for use against enemy submarines because they could hover and detect enemy vessels within 90 miles. An American coast guard officer came aboard to pilot the ship into the port of Philadelphia, known as the city of brotherly love. Perhaps it would be an omen of things to come.

The ship finally docked, and within two hours we debarked and were immediately subjected to a meticulous customs inspection, at which time my stamp collection and antique bibles were impounded presumably for more rigorous scrutiny. The group of children then boarded a train for a two-hour trip to Penn Station in New York City, followed by a bus ride to a big formal house in the Bronx.

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## Collateral Damage

Harry Markowicz

**Born in Berlin in 1937, Harry Markowicz survived the majority of the war in hiding with a Belgian family until the liberation of Brussels in September 1944.**

**THE MUCH ANTICIPATED ALLIED LANDING IN NORMANDY** began on June 6, 1944. In addition to ground forces, large formations of Allied bombers—Americans flying at high altitudes in the daytime and the British at lower altitudes at night—were increasingly trying to disrupt the movement of German troops and supplies toward the front. Air raids of bridges, railroad junctures, and airports became almost routine in Belgium, where my family had taken refuge after fleeing from Berlin before the start of World War II. With revenge in our hearts, we cheered for the Allied airmen while hoping we would not become their unintended victims.

The following quote, according to the website of the 457th Bomb Group of the US Air Force, is from a United States Army Air Force report on mission No. 111. He describes an air raid that took place on August 18, 1944, in a matter-of-fact style, using military jargon far removed from the feelings of those with even more at stake on the ground and rivers below:

Targets today for heavy bombers were of a tactical nature, the Eighth Air Force sending seventeen combat wings aloft to attack bridges, airfields, fuel dumps, and one aero-engine plant, in France and Belgium. The 457th's target was a railroad bridge over the Meuse River at Huy, 15 miles southwest of Liege, Belgium. The bridge, a 350-foot-long span of partly temporary wooden construction, was on a main supply line to northern France. . . . cloud cover and haze made aiming point identification difficult. However, the patterns of the bombs dropped by the 12-aircraft formations from 25,000 feet covered the bridge. After the target the Group headed north-northeast to the Dutch border, then withdrew across Holland to Overflakkee. No flak or fighters were encountered at any time.

Articles in local newspapers from that time tell a more disturbing story. The bombing of Huy resulted in the destruction or extensive damage of houses, the death of 80 residents, and the wounding of 156 more. The railroad bridge across the Meuse River in Huy—the assumed target of the air raid—was struck by a single bomb that didn't explode, thus leaving the bridge essentially intact for trains transporting German soldiers and their supplies. The municipal pool located in

the Meuse River 250 meters upstream from the bridge, however, was accidentally bombed. According to an August 18, 2014, article on [lavenir.net](http://lavenir.net), an online news site for Bouge, Belgium, a courageous young man dove repeatedly into the pool and managed to save a dozen swimmers. But despite his efforts, seven people drowned or were killed by the bomb.

Around that time, the word “*Libération*” was on the lips of everyone around me, but due to my young age, my understanding of the word’s implications was limited. To me it meant the hated German soldiers would be gone, but I was unaware of my family’s probable fate due to our Jewish identities if we had been caught. That comprehension wouldn’t begin to form until many months later when my Aunt Gutsha—physically and mentally unrecognizable—returned alone to Brussels from where she; her husband, Abraham; and their teenage son, Manfred, had been deported to Auschwitz on the 26th and last transport from Belgium.

My personal life prior to the liberation was in some ironic ways surprisingly “normal.” Mrs. Vanderlinden, with whose family I was living, was always warm and affectionate with me, frequently playing with me and giving me lots of attention. “Mammy” as I called her, never used a harsh word with me, except on one occasion when she feared I was about to reveal to the neighbors’ young son that I was Jewish, thereby endangering us all. Mrs. Vanderlinden had misinterpreted my actions, but shortly thereafter the Gestapo came to the neighborhood and though I was not detected, I was taken back to my parents’ hiding place in what appeared to be a vacant building in another part of Brussels.

My mother contacted the Belgian underground organization that helped Jews avoid deportation by providing money, false identification, and ration cards, but mostly by arranging for hiding places, in particular for children. Through this organization, my mother asked the Vanderlindens to move to a neighborhood where no one knew them, offering to pay for the move. The Vanderlindens agreed, and I rejoined them when they moved into their new apartment in a distant part of Brussels where I was able to pass for their son by assuming a new identity. I became Henry Vanderlinden, the son of a French-speaking, non-practicing Catholic family. My real identity had to be kept a secret, which I learned to do fairly easily.

Despite the penuries resulting from the Nazi occupation of Belgium, the Vanderlindens managed to spoil me, especially regarding food which was strictly rationed. For instance, on August 9, 1944, my seventh birthday, I ate a slice of “white” bread. By then I had been living with the Vanderlindens and passing for their son for nearly a year and a half. Mr. Vanderlinden worked for a commercial bakery



delivering bread to grocery stores using a horse and wagon. As a very special favor to me, he was able to obtain a loaf of bread, extremely scarce in those days, that did not contain any of the sawdust or other fillers commonly used in those days of hardship to make the flour go further.

On another occasion they surprised me with a gift of oranges. Before that I had never seen an orange. Most likely they had been smuggled in from France or Spain and sold on the black market. Buying anything on the black market was not only expensive but also dangerous as it was forbidden by the German authorities.

One day near the end of August 1944, my mother showed up unexpectedly at the Vanderlindens' apartment. Her infrequent visits were always unannounced and she would stay maybe an hour or two before returning to my parents' hideout. This particular visit was different. To my great displeasure she immediately informed Mrs. Vanderlinden and me that she had come to take me back to my parents' hiding place on rue Charles Degroux. She didn't explain why this counter-intuitive move had to be made at a time when the Nazi war against the Jews was still going on.

Had I been given a choice, my preference would have been to stay with the Vanderlindens. Life with them, as I said, seemed normal—there was no need to hide, to whisper in German because my parents didn't know French, or to be aware of the fear of the adults around me. Although I never forgot who my real parents were, I had become accustomed to pretending that I was Henry Vanderlinden. Mammy's reaction mirrored my own disappointment but she too refrained from saying anything to try to change my mother's mind. Apparently sensitive to our reluctance, my mother told me I could come back after the liberation. Indeed, after Brussels was liberated by Allied troops less than a week later, I returned to live with the Vanderlindens for another six months before finally rejoining my own family.

During the last year before the liberation my sister Rosi lived in the Ardennes Mountains with Louis and Angèle Serresia-Romainville, in a village named Bas-Oha. Uncle Louis, as Rosi called him, was a retired piano teacher. Their house faced a dirt road that ran along a bank of the Meuse River. Behind the house, railroad tracks ran parallel to the river. When my brother Mani needed a safer hiding place, he was brought to the home of Marie and Celestin Gaye, friends of the Serresia-Romainvilles. Marie had been engaged to Angèle's brother, who was killed in World War I. The Gayes lived nearby in the town of Huy, which was also located along the Meuse River.

Getting to the Ardennes from Brussels required traveling by train. German soldiers were usually posted in train stations, where they checked the identification cards of "suspicious" passengers. My mother's ID card was white, the color assigned to foreigners, and it was stamped in red ink

with the word *Juif* (Jew). Until recently, Mani was convinced that our mother never visited Rosi while she was hidden in the Ardennes because of the great risks such a trip presented.

During the year that Rosi lived with the Serresia-Romainvilles, she wrote an average of one letter per week to our parents. Despite the risk, our parents saved all of Rosi's letters. The mail at that time being subject to censorship, names of people and places were altered and news items were disguised. Although our parents hardly knew French, the letters were written in French, one of the two national languages, the other being Flemish. Apparently the young daughter of a German Jewish family who hid in the same building as my parents helped my mother translate her letters into French until the sad day the girl and her mother were arrested on their way to a grocery store and were never seen again.

Rosi wrote long, detailed letters about her everyday activities, from her piano lessons to her appointments with the local dentist, as well as about how they supplemented their diet with food they obtained without ration coupons by periodically visiting local farmers. She reported as well on local news, such as finding a piece of an Allied plane that had crashed and burned nearby and how some of the villagers buried the charred bodies of six crew members. She also shared news from Mani and myself, and occasionally from our cousins Manfred and Lotti, with whom she also corresponded.

The main purpose of the correspondence between Rosi and our parents was to reassure one another that everyone was safe and getting enough to eat. The first time we met after the liberation Rosi said to me, "Nothing happened to us; we were not caught and we didn't starve to death." This was after we started learning the fate of the Jews who were deported to concentration camps in eastern Europe. Though we lost many members of our extended family, many years went by before we began to realize that we had also paid a high emotional price for our skin-of-our-teeth survival.

Following a prolonged illness, Rosi died in New York City in 1996. Soon afterwards, her daughter Marna, who lives in Jerusalem with her husband and children, became the link between the surviving members of our extended family who, as a result of the war, ended up living in widespread regions of the world. That role was previously taken on by her mother, and her grandmother (my mother) before that. Marna also has an unquenchable thirst for knowledge about the lives of our forebears.

Some years ago, Marna became interested in knowing what her mother wrote in her wartime letters, but because she doesn't know French, she asked Mani and me to translate them.

Over the years Mani did the lion's share of the translating, and Rosi's letters can now be read in English. In the process, I learned a great deal about our lives during this period, although some mysteries remain unanswered. From one of her letters, an especially moving one, Mani and I learned that despite the enormous risks, our mother had indeed visited Rosi in Bas-Oha one Saturday afternoon. Some aspects of her account are unexplained. For instance, Rosi doesn't indicate in her letter who accompanied our mother on this journey or how they traveled, nor why Mani, who lived nearby in Huy, was not present at this reunion.

In her letter of August 15, 1944, Rosi writes that Marcel (Mani's *nom de guerre*) was spending the summer practicing the violin an hour daily and his afternoons were taken up in the municipal swimming pool. She describes the pool as consisting of four barges tied together in a rectangular shape in the Meuse River, which flows along the city of Huy. In the same letter, Rosi inquires about the bombing of Brussels. As the Allied troops were getting closer, the air raids became more and more frequent and the number of civilian casualties increased.

Rosi's next communication is dated August 20, 1944. She reports on the bombing of Huy, which took place in the late afternoon of August 18, 1944. As soon as the air raid was over, Aunt Angèle rode her bicycle the five kilometers to Huy to make sure Mani and the Gayes were safe. It turned out Mani had had a premonition: he had spent a very small amount of time in the pool that day and had gone back home early. When the sirens started wailing, Mani and the Gayes had quickly gone into their shelter built into the hill behind their house. They were all right, but the house, like most houses in Huy, had a few broken windows.

Rosi finished her account of the Huy bombing by stating that Namur was also bombed that day, resulting in 330 civilian deaths and many more hundreds wounded. She concluded, "It is no longer safe to travel."

Over seven decades later, reading Rosi's letter of August 20, 1944, I found out about Mani's close call in the bombing raid of Huy. It reminded me of a statement I overheard my mother make to a friend after the war, "If we were going to be killed in bombing raids, we chose to die together." It began to make sense. At long last, I understood the reason my mother made the dangerous round trip to the Vanderlindens to bring me back with her to my parents' hideout just days before the liberation of Brussels.

## They Are Coming for Me

**IT'S 5 A.M.** A brief knock on the door and it opens. Simultaneously, the bright lights go on in the room. A small man wearing a white jacket walks in, carrying what looks like a box with a handle similar to what a hot dog vendor uses at a baseball game. It contains plastic tubes organized by the color of their corks. "A small pinch ... ." That's how phlebotomists warn you as they stick a needle in one of your veins. I used to be squeamish, but by now it's become routine. Nevertheless, I look away as the needle is inserted in my arm and my blood begins to fill the small tubes.

Now it's 6 a.m. Another knock at the door; it opens, and the lights go on again. The nurse comes in to check my vital signs. When she leaves, she turns off the lights and partially closes the door so I can have enough light to walk to the restroom, which is in the room.

I've been awake for several hours, waiting. The electrophysiology lab, which looks like an operating room, opens at 7:30 a.m., and I'm the first patient scheduled to be taken there for a cardiac ablation today. I have been dreading this procedure, but treatment with medication is no longer working for me.

The electrophysiologist, who most likely spent his youth developing his hand-eye coordination by playing video games, will invade my heart and spend several hours manipulating five catheters inserted through two veins, one in each leg. If successful (and there is no guarantee) I will be able to live free of my scourge—atrial fibrillation.

I'm waiting with some trepidation to be transported to the lab. From time to time, I hear a wheelchair being pushed in the hallway, but so far they haven't been for me. Then I hear a wheelchair stop outside my door and a man's voice says, "I'm here to transport Markowicz to the EPL." They have come for me, and my life is no longer under my control.

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The stress resulting from all the waiting conjures up a fading memory from another place, far away, and another time, long ago, when I was five years old and waiting for them to come get me and my family.

During the summer of 1942 in Nazi-occupied Belgium, the Germans started rounding up Jewish families and deporting them to eastern Europe. At the time, their exact destination was unknown. If reports filtered back regarding their fate, no sane person could have believed them. In any case, no one shared those rumors with me.

My family lived on rue Charles LeGroux, a quiet residential street in the heart of Brussels, not far from the Parc du Cinquantaire. Our apartment was on the first floor of a three-story house. Below us, the basement apartment was vacant. Another Jewish couple lived in the apartment above us with their children, who ranged in age from teenagers to young adults.

On this particular day, we were socializing with our upstairs neighbors in their apartment. When I told my brother that I needed to use the WC, he walked me down the stairs to the toilet, located under the stairway on our floor. He waited in the hallway, then suddenly opened the door to the WC, grabbed me by the arm and whispered that someone was trying to open the front door. We ran up the stairs as quietly as we could to warn the others. My mother and the other couple ran down the stairs and went out the back door. I don't know where they hid, but I assume they climbed over the wall separating our backyard from the one next door.

My father led all the children, including my sister, my brother, and me, as well as the kids from the other family, up the stairs to the attic. I didn't know why he chose that dead-end route for us; he may have thought there was not enough time for everyone to get downstairs, past the front door, and out the back way, before the front door would be opened by whoever was trying to come in.

In the attic, the opening above the stairway was enclosed by three walls, a ceiling, and a door facing the stairway. It was as if a small room had been built above the stairway without reaching the roof, leaving an open space between it and the roof.

My father pointed to a short ladder propped up against one of the walls and quietly told us to climb up and lie down on top of the little ceiling above the stairway. He instructed us to be completely silent. He handed up the ladder and told us to set it down next to us. He stood next to the doorway and listened for any sound coming from downstairs.

I remember my sister, who was already a teenager, lying near me, glancing up at me with fear in her eyes. Her first contact with the Nazis had occurred years earlier in Berlin, where we had lived previously, and she knew better than I how serious our situation might be. It felt like being in a state of suspension; holding our breath, waiting, expecting that at any moment German soldiers would come up the stairs and discover us all.

In fact, nothing happened. After a long wait my father said, "Everything is all right, you can come down now." It felt as if I could breathe normally again. We climbed down and rejoined the adults, who had come back from wherever they had hidden. Later, we learned that our landlord was the

person who had been trying to unlock the front door. He was trying out various keys to find the one that fit the front door lock. It would have been a completely innocuous event under normal circumstances.

I never found out why my father didn't hide with the children. After all, we never spoke about what we went through during the Shoah. Recently, it occurred to me that if it had been the Germans trying to enter the building, they would have found my father in the attic, acting as a decoy; we children might have been overlooked in our hiding place. He would have saved our lives at the price of his own. Sometimes distance and time provide hindsight.

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I wake up in the recovery room. I'm told by a male nurse I remember seeing in the operating room that it all went well. He adds that the electrophysiologist is speaking with my wife, Arlene, and she will join me shortly. Now I must lie completely immobile for the next five hours to avoid any bleeding at the two sites where the catheters were inserted into my legs. It may be several months before we know whether the ablation was effective. According to the medical literature the procedure has a 70 percent chance of success.

Two years have now gone by without any life-threatening arrhythmia events. Once again luck appears to have tilted in my favor.

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## A Life in a Box

Alfred Münzer

**Alfred Münzer was born in November 1941 in The Hague, Netherlands. He survived the Holocaust because an Indonesian family living in the Netherlands rescued him.**

**MY FAMILY, WHAT SOME MIGHT CALL MY BIOLOGICAL FAMILY**, lived in a box: a box roughly the size of a shoebox but much more elegant, a powder-blue flip-top box adorned with pink lilacs that had been used to display high-end perfumed soap bars—Boldoot or Castella—in Mom’s cosmetics store. The box was filled with photographs that introduced me to a world inhabited, in addition to my mom whom I had gotten to know in the flesh, by a dad, sisters, grandparents, and aunts and uncles whom I would otherwise never have met. I don’t remember when Mom first introduced me to the family in the box. It certainly wasn’t immediately after we had been reunited. I wasn’t quite four and my mom’s sudden addition to the family I already had—Papa, Mima, Willie, Dewie, and Robby—was more than enough for me to deal with. But I did come to understand soon after, that I had two sisters, portrayed in large, colorized photographs that were displayed wherever Mom and I came to live in those early years after we were reunited. My older sister, Eva, wore a blue dress and held her favorite doll, and my younger sister, Leah, wore a cream-colored dress. Eva had a broad smile, and Leah was more serious, apprehensive even. I must admit that I was somewhat envious of the attention my mother and others paid to my sisters.

Tante Jo—she wasn’t really my tante or aunt, but that’s what I called her—and her sister, tante Ko, lived next door to us before we went into hiding. They used to show me the books that Eva had been able to read when she was only four, Catholic children’s books with two columns, one headed by a color picture of a little angel, the other by a little devil whispering in a child’s ear. And Mom had saved all of Eva’s notebooks, and her handwriting was so perfect, something I couldn’t dream of ever achieving. Leah, Mom told me, was so sweet, so considerate of others. Was it she or Eva, my mom told me, who had recoiled in a neighborhood bakery when she saw a midget with a very deformed hand and then had quickly regained her composure and made a point of shaking the poor man’s hand, saying, “*Goede dag Meneertje*,” (Hello, little sir). How, I wondered, could I ever possibly match such tact? So, I was jealous of my sisters, especially Eva. Even today, Dewie Madna, my sister while I was in hiding with the Madna family, relates to me primarily, it seems, as the brother of her little playmates, Eva and Leah. Dewie is now 87 and still mourns Eva and Leah in a way that I never could because she had known them “for real,” while I only knew “about” them.

As time went on I slowly came to learn that Eva and Leah, like my dad and so many others, had not “come back.” I never questioned where it was that they had not “come back” from. Aunt Jo and Aunt Ko would tell me they were now in Heaven with God, the bearded man whose arms stretched over the little angel and the little devil in Eva’s books.

I am not sure when my mother first showed me the contents of the box and when I first really became acquainted with Eva, Leah, and my dad. Mom told me the stories that went with each of the hundred or so photographs in the box, stories that went back even further than our home on Zoutmanstraat, photos of my mom as a young woman that translated into humorous tales about her hometown, the pranks she played as the youngest of at least six sisters and brothers, —I never found out the exact number—heartwarming stories about my grandparents and the embarrassing words coming out of the mouth of her little nephew, my cousin Norbert, when my mom left home to join her siblings in Berlin. Norbert, she told me, would studiously look out the window of the streetcar and suddenly take the thumb he had been sucking on out of his mouth, point to the overhead wires and say “*Büstenhalter*” (brassiere)! Then there was the wedding picture that made her cringe at the memory of a hairdo that wasn’t to her taste and of the hurried replacement of the engraved wedding band that the Orthodox rabbi forbade my father from using in the ceremony

But it was the stories spun out of the later photos in the box, the photos of my immediate family, of my mom, my dad, Eva and Leah, and of one uncle—my father’s brother, Emil, who, Mom told me, had come to join us from Germany—and photos of me, that placed me at the center of a family reassembled and recreated as if in a play in which I was a character, a family and a life that was cruelly disrupted.

As my mother held a photograph of me and my sisters and told me how the whole family had watched me intently as I, in my playpen, held a large biscuit in my fist, ate it around the edges, then dropped it and carefully picked it up with my fingers and finished eating it, I could sense their eyes on me, hear their applause, and feel their pride and their love, a love that has served me a lifetime.

## Guests

There is an ancient Jewish belief that there are seven imaginary, mystical guests, called *Ushpizin* in Aramaic, who visit families on Sukkot, the Festival of Tabernacles that commemorates the protection afforded by the Eternal as the Israelites wandered the desert. The guests, one for each day of the holiday, are said to be the biblical figures Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron,



Joseph, and David. Each is invited in turn, with a prayer formulated by 16th-century Kabbalists, to join the family in the *sukkah*, the temporary shelter built of natural materials that is at the heart of the holiday.

But I welcomed my own imaginary guests to the table long before I knew about Ushpizin. The Holocaust deprived me of a father, sisters, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. When I was five or six, I first became aware of those missing members of my family. I boasted that I would make up for the loss and have 12 kids of my own, and I conjured up a whole loud brood around the dinner table. But that was before I learned the facts of life and that it takes more than the wish of one person to make a family. Slowly, through my childhood and teens, I came to understand that I was different and that marriage and having a family of my own wasn't to be.

It's not that I lack the love that comes from having a family of my own. There are the continuing bonds with the brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews that I acquired when I was rescued during the Holocaust by the Madna family. There are the distant survivors of my mother's family who escaped to Bolivia. And most importantly, there is the family of Joel, my life partner, who has embraced me in every possible way as one of their own, just like my mother made Joel her second son. And, considering our very crowded table at the Passover Seder, I certainly do not want for friends. There are also the hundreds of kids, far more than any imaginable progeny, whose lives I have touched by sharing my life story and the lesson that I derive from the Holocaust: that even when surrounded by evil, it is possible, like the family who saved me, to do what is right.

But especially on Friday evenings, as we welcome Shabbat, and on Jewish holidays, as we stand at the festively set dinner table, when we take in the aroma of traditional cooking coming from the kitchen and light candles in candlesticks that long ago graced the table of my grandparents, and we chant the Kiddush over wine to sanctify the day, I often sense being joined by generations of family. Joined, not only by my late mother or Joel's late mother, who indeed often spent their Shabbat or holiday with us, but also by my dad, my sisters, and even my grandparents, aunts, and uncles, all of whom I only know through photographs and stories told by my mother. I hear their voices as they softly sing along in an ageless melody, and I see their smiles and feel their warmth as we embrace and say, "*Gut Shabbos, Gut Yontif*." I do not know what comes after we die. But these Ushpizin, these personal mystical guests, speak of a bit of an afterlife that gives me a measure of comfort.

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## Tracing Roots through Our Ancestors

### Halina Yasharoff Peabody

**Halina (Litman) Yasharoff Peabody, born in Krakow, Poland, survived the war with her mother and sister by posing as Catholics using false papers bought from a priest.**

**I REMEMBER VISITS TO MY MATERNAL GRANDPARENTS EVERY CHRISTMAS.** Though we are Jewish, this was the time we made our annual visit. My grandfather Stefan (Shmuel) Schreiber worked as an accountant for the Wedel Chocolate Factory and used to bring foil paper so I could shape it into a ball to play with. Grandmother Regina was always at her sewing machine, where she had a lot of treasures, including a fascinating box of buttons, which I played with when I was five years old. They lived in the center of Krakow in an apartment with a balcony. This was very important, my mother told me, because it was used to great effect to hide the Christmas tree from my grandfather's notice. He was liberal, but the tree was just too much for him to allow. My grandfather had moved the family from a suburb of Krakow into the city so the children could go to Polish public schools. They didn't speak Yiddish at home, only Polish.

In 1939, when World War II started, my grandfather Stefan had a heart attack and died. Grandmother Regina later was killed in Auschwitz.

Olga, my mother, was the youngest of their four children. She told me she was a disappointment to her father because he was hoping for another son and paid little attention to her as a child. However, in her teen years when my mother became the swimming champion of Poland and won many awards and medals, she then became a source of pride to both of her parents.

My uncle Ignacy also troubled my grandfather. He was extremely bright and became a professor at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. This was no small achievement for a Jewish man in Poland in the 1920s, and he had had to change his name and religion to be allowed to work there. My grandfather could not accept this and banished him from the family.

The oldest daughter, my mother's sister Augustyna (Gucia), was married to a businessman and had a son, Jerzyk (George), who was a few years older than I. They also lived in Krakow. George had a very strict upbringing. My aunt's idea of parenting and good education was to hire home teachers

and have his lessons in German half of the day and French the other half. His time with his parents was limited to dinner, and after that he was sent off to his room. He did not have a happy childhood.

Irka was my mother's favorite sister. She was married and lived in Warsaw. I know little about her life except that her husband, Julek, was a big joker and loved to eat. When he liked something on the table, he would make everyone laugh while he ingested all of it.

My family lived in Zaleszczyki in the south of Poland. When World War II started on September 1, 1939, I was only 6½ years old, but I do remember that my parents knew that our town was going to be occupied by the Russians. The rest of my family in the north would live under German occupation. I later learned that this was an agreement between the two powers to split Poland in two.

There was great panic in our town in anticipation of the Russian occupation and many people decided to escape to Romania, which was right across the Dniestr River that encircled Zaleszczyki. The river was the natural frontier with Poland, so it was easy to just cross the bridge. The men felt that they were most in danger from the Russians, fearing that they would be conscripted into the Russian Army. My mother and I did not join my father in his flight to Romania because my sister was only two months old and my father thought we would be better off staying at home. He didn't think that women and children would be in danger from the Russians.

At the same time, my two aunts left their homes in the north and crossed to our side because they were more afraid of the Germans than the Russians. After the Russians settled in to our town and took everything they could lay their hands on, my father and some of his fellow runaways decided to come back. Unfortunately, the Russians had sealed the border by then and arrested them. They were put on trial, and my father was accused of being a spy. He received a sentence of 20 years hard labor and was sent to Siberia.

In the meantime, the Russians offered anyone who had left the German side to go back home without punishment, and both my aunts signed up. We learned later that it was a ruse and that all the people who signed up were arrested, and instead of going back home, they were also sent to Siberia. However, my aunt Irka was sick the day they were scheduled to leave, and in a decision that seemed completely out of character, the Russians took pity on her and left her behind. She and her husband were later murdered in Auschwitz.

My mother was left with the two children, and we survived the German occupation by getting false identities as Catholics with many close calls. We had many miraculous escapes and never knew if we would survive another day.

As the war continued Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill realized that the war was not going well and more men were needed to fight the Germans. At a historic meeting in Yalta, Stalin agreed to allow political prisoners like my father to join a Polish Army unit, created by General Anders, who was also a “political prisoner.” The unit would be under British command and was allowed to leave Russia. Guica, my other aunt; her husband, Bolek; and son, Jerzyk (George), had survived in Russia and were then also able to leave Russia with the Anders Army.

When the war ended, my mother posted notices looking for my father, whom we found in Palestine (now Israel), where he had a sister who had emigrated in the 1930s with her family.

As a British officer, my father had the choice to either stay with his family in Palestine or settle in England. My parents chose England, where we tried to pick up our lives. My aunt Gucia and cousin George came to live with us. Uncle Bolek died on the way out of Russia of complications from diabetes and is buried in Teheran.

Everybody’s gone now. Only my sister and I are here to tell the tale to our children and grandchildren, but I am the only one with these memories. My sister was too young to remember, which perhaps is a blessing.

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## Mamlock House

### Alfred Traum

**Alfred (Freddie) Traum was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1929. In June 1939, he and his older sister were sent to England on the Kindertransport. Their parents were murdered in the Holocaust.**

**TWO YEARS AGO I WAS ON A NOSTALGIC** visit to Manchester, England, where I had lived. I visited Mamlock House, a Jewish center where many meetings and lectures were given.

The place was open, although there didn't appear to be anyone around. I walked about scrutinizing the various artifacts on display when my eyes became fixed on a large glass and wooden display case attached to the wall. In it were commemorative plaques honoring members of the local Jewish community who had made the ultimate sacrifice for their country in war. Amongst them was a photo and a write-up of my nephew Howard, who was killed in the Sinai campaign during the "Yom Kippur war" in 1973. Howard was almost 21 when Egypt attacked Israel. As a reserve officer in the British army, he was immediately deployed to staff duties at the base camp of his armored unit. However, Howard was reluctant to be placed at a desk job and requested reassignment to a fighting unit. Even though he was an officer, he took an assignment as a tank driver and was immediately transferred to a unit in the Sinai, where the fighting was taking place. His tank took a direct hit from a wire-guided missile and was decommissioned. Only the tank commander was badly injured and in need of medical attention. Howard radioed for a medic and ordered the others to climb aboard a nearby tank while he remained with the wounded soldier. Before the Israeli medic could get to them, an Egyptian patrol came upon them and, with complete disregard to the Geneva Convention, shot them both at close range in cold blood. Such was their end. Howard was mentioned in dispatches and later awarded a medal for his bravery for not abandoning a wounded comrade.

My mind slipped back to better times, when my sister Ruth, her husband, David, and their two boys, Howard and Eli, first arrived in Israel. I met them at the ship and went with them to their new home at Moshav Habonim, a farming community south of Haifa along the Mediterranean Sea. I recalled how over the years I visited them every five weeks when my ship, the *SS Zion*, completed another round trip from Israel to the United States. I would take the noon train out of Haifa heading south to Dor, a small stop between two farming communities, Moshav Habonim and Kibbutz Nachsholim. The train passed my sister's house and her family would stand on the

stoop to check and see if I was on the train. I would wave wildly and they all responded likewise. The boys would run along the path to greet me. It was about three quarters of a mile, but it was the happiest stretch ever for me. Howard and Eli were both bubbling over with their news of what was going on in their world and questions for me. Howard would be wheezing slightly due to his asthma. Even at that time, he was concerned that he might not be accepted into the army. By the time he was 18, his asthma had all but disappeared and he was accepted into the Israeli Defense Forces. In the evening after dinner, we would all take a folding chair and make our way up the hill to the social hall, where we would gather and watch whatever film the community had acquired. Later we would break up and retreat to several homes where the party continued. At times we might even stroll down to the beach and take a late-night dip in the sea. As I recall, the water was delightful. The following day was Sabbath, which meant for most there was no need to rise early; there was time to relax.

As much as I enjoyed sailing on a fine passenger liner and visiting many parts of the world, I cherished above all else coming home to the welcome that I received from my family. All those images flashed by me as I stood in front of that display case for a long while.

Just then someone in Mamlock House tapped me on my shoulder and asked, “Anyone you know there?”

I proudly pointed to Howard’s picture and, with a lump in my throat, answered, “Yes, that’s my nephew.”

## Vienna Chanukah 1938

**THE FIRST DAY OF CHANUKAH FELL ON DECEMBER 23**, just 42 days after the infamous “Night of Broken Glass” (Kristallnacht). That night most of Vienna’s synagogues were torched, Jewish stores were looted and decimated, many homes were broken into, and men were beaten and in some cases arrested and taken to concentration camps. That night was still fresh in memories when the decision was made, nevertheless, to go along with the Chanukah celebration and pageant for which so many of us had rehearsed.

Kristallnacht only made it clear that the secular world was denied to us and appeared to galvanize the Jewish community to look inward and, in some ways, enhance Jewish life.

I had sung in our synagogue's choir, but after Kristallnacht that was no longer possible. However, a new and much larger choir was organized, for which I auditioned and was accepted. It was the Jewish answer to the well-known Vienna Boys Choir. We were called the *Yudisbe singer knaben* (Jewish Boys Choir). We rehearsed twice a week at a place in Vienna's second district, where there was a large Jewish population. Since I lived a long way from there, I was given travel vouchers for my commute. It made me feel quite important. The choir organizers had us all measured for matching sailor suits. We gave several concerts and made two recordings. The choirmaster had big plans. Although life went along as normally as could be expected, in each family separate and desperate plans were being made with the hope of leaving Vienna for a safe haven. For my sister and me, it would be the Kindertransport for safety in England.

Meanwhile, the Chanukah celebration, conducted in a large hall, went on as planned. My sister and some of her friends were dressed as Maccabee soldiers and performed a dance. I, dressed all in white and wearing a bandana on my forehead with a large paper candle "glowing" a colored flame, stood on the stage with seven of my friends similarly clad. I still remember the first of my lines—*"Ich bin das erste licht"* (I am the first light)—followed by more words that I do not remember. As each of us said our lines, an adult standing at the foot of the stage lit the appropriate candle on a large Chanukah menorah. When all eight candles had been lit and the blessing recited, the choir began to sing "Rock of Ages" (*Maoz tsur yeshuoti*). My mother was sitting in the first row kvelling, she was so proud of our performance. All those present joined in the song and we forgot about the harsh world outside. Naturally, as on all such occasions, this was followed with festive food and drink. We all went home with hope in our hearts.

The Nazis may have destroyed our synagogues, but not our spirits.

In retrospect, looking back to those days it just seems ironic that we were celebrating the successful Jewish revolt against the occupying forces of the Greek Empire, and the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem, while at the same time clouds were gathering to bring about the darkest period in Jewish history.

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## Rosh Hashanah This Year

Susan Warsinger

**Susan (Hilsenrath) Warsinger was born in Bad Kreuznach, Germany. She escaped with her brother and was smuggled into France before leaving for the United States in 1941.**

**IN PREVIOUS YEARS**, my daughters and their husbands, my grandchildren, and other family members celebrated the beginning of the new Jewish year with a great feast. I took it for granted that we would always have our Jewishness in common. This year, the Jewish year of 5778, another new member has been added to our family. Her name is Sehar, a beautiful and intelligent young woman who recently married my oldest grandchild, Matthew. She is Indian and Muslim. I have learned some Indian and Muslim customs since meeting her family, especially during the preparations for the wedding.

Sehar's parents hosted an engagement party at their home, where all members of my family were invited, and we had the opportunity to meet Sehar's family and friends. Some came all the way from India. When I first met Sehar, she wore blue jeans. At this event she wore a lovely peach-colored sari, embroidered with gold. She looked like a queen. The Indian cuisine was spread out all over tables in the kitchen and dining room. The aromas were enticing and exotic. I had a good time trying new dishes, including the desserts which Sehar's mother had prepared. Everybody mingled and enjoyed good conversations. Near the end of the party, the bride's family gave my grandson's parents a huge basket filled with sweet items to eat. My daughter told me that the basket of food was so abundant that she still has some of the candies left even now for her to eat.

Two weeks before the wedding party, a friend of my new daughter-in-law's family invited friends and family to a Dholki, named after a *dbolk* or drum. At this party in a restaurant in Virginia, the guests sang Indian songs to the tunes of the dholk. The Dholki is a Pakistani custom. I learned that Indian Muslim traditions are very similar to Pakistani Muslim traditions, and they borrow customs from one another. Sehar looked lovely in a yellow gown, and Matthew wore a white Indian suit and looked very debonair. Both wore yellow garlands around their necks and sat on a dais covered in white. Pages of scientific books and literature of antiquity were displayed on the wall behind them. I asked the hostess, who designed the decorated wall, the meaning of those pages. She laughed and said the display was in the couple's honor because they are intellectuals.



The couple sat on the dais behind a table covered with a white and gold cloth strewn with bouquets of flowers. Everyone wanted to take a picture behind the couple. The theme of intellectualism was continued by the centerpieces on the guests' tables. Each had three books piled one on top of each other and topped by a pot of flowers. The cuisine was traditional Indian dishes with wonderful spices. The guests enjoyed dancing and singing to Indian music. The younger people sat on the floor in their opulent Indian dresses and clapped their hands while singing. I was elated to see Matthew, who memorized an Indian dance with a complicated choreography, perform for his bride to be. She smiled shyly and seemed to be very pleased. Even though no alcohol was served, as is the Muslim custom, there was much merriment.

Matthew and Sehar decided that they would be married by the justice of the peace on Friday at noon on August 11, 2017. Since the room in the courthouse in Washington was small, only the immediate family was invited to this event. Sehar again looked elegant in her light pink gown, and Matthew wore his business suit with a pink tie. When the wedding party entered the chamber for the civil ceremony, the magistrate greeted us and was quite friendly. After the couple said their vows, the magistrate pronounced them "married." My daughter Terese, the mother of the groom, explained to me later that the courthouse now uses language that is all inclusive. They no longer say, "I now pronounce you man and wife." The bride and groom signed the marriage certificate. Their parents and I were also invited to sign as witnesses. Afterwards, we enjoyed a delicious lunch in a restaurant near the courthouse.

The young couple each decided to honor their own heritage. I think they also decided to please their families. Therefore, after the courthouse ceremony and after lunch, we proceeded to my house for the Jewish marriage ceremony. Matthew made arrangements for a rabbi to marry them according to the Jewish tradition. My daughter made a chuppah with four dowels and a cover to make a canopy for the couple to stand under during the ceremony. They signed the ketubah, the marriage contract. Then, the rabbi recited the Kidushim, the betrothal blessing, over a cup of wine. Matthew then, according to tradition, broke the glass with his foot and everyone shouted "Mazel Tov." The couple, newly married according to the Jewish religion, drove to Sehar's parents' house, where they celebrated the Muslim marriage customs.

Sehar and Matthew have many friends from all over the world. The big wedding celebration was planned for a Sunday brunch at a country club in Maryland on August 13, 2017. Since so many of the guests came from out of town, they were invited to a dinner on Saturday, the night before the wedding celebration. This event took place in a restaurant in Washington. I was so happy to meet many of their friends. I also enjoyed being with my family who lived close by and out of town.

The Sunday brunch, the final festivity of their wedding, was a grand and glorious celebration. There were about 200 people of all ages mingling, talking, and enjoying each other. Sehar was stunning in a long beige dress with gold embroidery. Matthew wore an Indian suit similar to those I have seen in the movies and on television. Some ladies wore beautiful saris, and the Indian men wore elegant suits similar to Matthew's. The celebration was a melding of two families' cultures. The brunch included Indian dishes and Jewish dishes, such as lox and bagels. During the repast there were many speeches praising the accomplishments of both the bride and groom.

Since we are living at a time when there is so much misunderstanding among cultures, I am happy to see how Sehar's family and Matthew's family, from different cultures, find so much in common. I welcome Sehar with love into our expanded family. I wish Sehar and her family, for this Rosh Hashanah, this New Year, a healthy and happy future. I also hope that I will have wonderful great-grandchildren who will make positive contributions to the world and who will be part of a generation that will work toward even more understanding of all cultures.

## Schiffchen oder Hütchen (Little Boat or Little Hat)

**I ALWAYS MARVEL AT THE ABILITY** that my friends and colleagues have to remember the small details of their childhood. I, too, want to see the world the way I experienced it when I was a very young girl. For me, it is just so difficult to recollect, a demand on my mind. I am sure that it is not because I want to erase it due to what I went through. I just worry because I cannot remember. It makes me feel good when my daughter, Terese, assures me that it is "because there is just a lot to remember."

Just recently I found a black-and-white picture of myself. It was probably taken when I was about four years old. My father, who is also in the picture, is pointing at something for me to look at. We are walking in a park or a garden, and I'm wearing a white dress embroidered with flowers. It must have been taken shortly after Hitler and the Nazis came to power. I am sure that it was at the time when Jewish stores were boycotted and my father lost his linen store in Bad Kreuznach where we lived. I want to remember and see the world the way I saw it when the picture was taken. I close my eyes in order to see. I mostly see black and white. I am trying to embrace the landscape. I am trying to see colors. We were in a garden that was bordered by large linden trees that had glossy dark-green leaves with heart-shaped long pointed tips. The bright sky shone through a tunnel of branches. Was the sun warm on my back? The lindens were in bloom with yellowish flowers and had an odor so fragrant that I can smell it now. I look at my picture again. A flicker of remembrance thrills me. The white dress enveloped me like a cloud and the flowers embroidered on my dress matched the apricot, lilac, crimson, and violet flowers that were all around us.

I remember that there was an ice cream cart nearby with a white canopy splashed with purple and gold. Since I was too young to read, I could not make out the letters that were inscribed on the cart. A middle-aged lady from behind beckoned to me to come closer. I was very shy, and even though I was very young, I knew that Jews were not allowed to buy from Gentiles. My father encouraged me to approach the ice cream cart. To my great happiness, the lady came forward to greet me with a smile and asked me if I wanted my ice cream in *ein Schiffchen* oder *ein Hütchen* (in a little boat or in a little hat). She explained in German that the cost of the Schiffchen was five Phennigs and the Hütchen was ten. I felt a pulse in my throat and understood that this lady made a choice to sell her ice cream to a Jewish family even though the community of Bad Kreuznach forbade such action. I turned to my father to ask him which ice cream container I should purchase. He suggested that I make the decision. I had to struggle with this. I learned that the Hütchen was bigger and was filled with a scoop, and the Schiffchen was filled with a spatula. However, I was sure that my father had to be economical with his money and, therefore, I chose the less expensive Schiffchen. I watched the lady pile my “boat” full of ice cream and I knew that I had made the right decision.

When I open my eyes, I think that I should be distraught about remembering how the Nazis slowly and gradually began their terror of the Jewish population when Hitler first came into power. I think I should be troubled about my father’s struggle to provide for his family. But instead I feel tenderness for this lady who chose not to follow antisemitic laws and to do what she thought was right. What if all Germans at that time had not been complicit with the Nazi regime and acted the same way she did?

Did I edit some of my memory because I saw my black-and white-picture? A few years ago I visited the Kuhrhaus Hotel in Bad Kreuznach with my brother, Ernest. It stands in the park where the ice cream purchase took place. Could this trip to the town where I was born have helped me remember? I also ask myself if this first touch of my past is important in my personal history now? Does it affect the way that I see or conduct my life today?

I know that I do not want to erase my past and I do not want to reinvent the past and my part in it. I do want to remember details that I can see and touch and smell and remember the person I was. I look forward to the roads that I still have to travel but want to look back on the ones that I have journeyed.

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## Living Up to Our Values

### Martin Weiss

**Martin Weiss was born in Polana, Czechoslovakia, and survived Auschwitz-Birkenau and Mauthausen. He was liberated by US troops at the Gunskirchen camp in Austria in 1945.**

**WHEN I ARRIVED IN THE UNITED STATES AFTER WORLD WAR II AT AGE 16,** I was very anxious to move on with my life and not let my experiences during the Holocaust define me. I got a job in a grocery store and with help from my brother-in-law, I rented a room from a Hungarian family so I could be independent. That helped because I spoke Hungarian. My biggest problem was I did not speak or understand a word of English. So, I enrolled in night school. I was taught English, but also learned about US history and the Constitution. The teacher, Mrs. Durst, was a very nice, elderly lady who stressed how great American democracy is, that we are a country of laws. I knew about democracy because I grew up in Czechoslovakia and I went to Czech schools until the fourth grade. Then the war started and our school was closed.

My teacher observed how anxious I was to learn English and to learn about the United States, so she suggested I read the *New York Times* to improve my vocabulary. I read the paper, as advised, even though there were many words I did not know. In one article, there was a sentence referring to “Jim Crow” laws in the South. The teacher explained to me that they were practiced in the southern states. In the South, she told me, black people were not allowed to walk alongside a white person on the sidewalk, etc. I asked her to explain how it could be possible that President Lincoln had freed the slaves 150 years ago and that according to the Constitution “all men are created equal,” and still black people were deprived of their equality. She explained that it was a state’s rights decision. I asked her how that could be possible, and how that did not violate the person’s rights under the Constitution.

So I used this analogy: If I resided in Alabama or Georgia and wanted a passport to go overseas, where would I apply? She replied that I would be applying to Washington, DC. I pointed out that US government law supersedes states’ laws, and the states should be forbidden to pick and choose which laws they adhere to. So how was it possible for some states not to live by the laws of the country?

I also noticed that in the northern states like New York or New Jersey black people were not always treated as equals, even without Jim Crow laws being enforced. As I started reading books and other publications, I soon discovered that even the United States did not live up to the freedom it boasted about. The teacher agreed with me, but then she explained again that it was still a state's right. At the grocery store where I worked, our customers were both whites and African Americans, and we treated everyone with respect. We tried to accommodate all of our customers' food preferences, so we brought in vegetables from the South and many cuts of meat. Then during the Korean War, I was drafted into the army and stationed in Fort Lee, Virginia. After a month of basic training we got our first weekend pass and were allowed to go into town. Everyone was excited to go and have a beer, etc.

There were several black soldiers in our barrack. One man, Willie, was from Paterson, New Jersey, and was billeted near me. We asked him to come to town with us but he refused. No matter how much we coaxed him, he refused. So we went without him. When we got on the bus, we noticed all the black soldiers were seated in the back of the bus and we realized why Willie had refused to go to town. Even if he had come, he would not have been allowed to enter the bar with us. And yet, the merchants in town made their income from the people on the base. I encountered another incident after this. I befriended a black soldier from Alabama. One day I came back from work and he was crying. I asked him what happened and why was he so upset. He told me he had gotten orders to ship out to Korea. I asked if most of the men were going. He said, "I'm going because I'm black." I knew some fellas who worked in personnel, so the next day I asked a friend about this and he told me it was true. He explained that many of the captains and lieutenants who made these decisions were from the South, and they did this on purpose.

As years went by, I saw progress in civil rights for both Jewish people and black people in the United States, which I thought was long overdue.

Then, in 2017, the rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, was a wake-up call that meant, to me, that we had not shed the faults of the past. To see some Americans marching with swastikas was scary. I kept thinking, "How am I seeing this in the United States we feel so proud of? How can we teach others that our democracy is great?"

As a volunteer at the Museum, I speak to students all over the country and I'm always proud to see how caring they are and the ways they interact with each other. They want to learn about the Holocaust and try to understand, and that tells us that we are doing a good job teaching and educating our young. If we will resolve to get back to the values we say we believe in, we can live up to the values of our country.

## Many Times Born, Many Times Died

All of us have had the experience of being born one time. If you are a Holocaust survivor, like me, you may have been born many times and died many times, as well.

Starting in Auschwitz, upon our arrival the first thing we discovered was a fear that no human being can imagine unless you were there. We arrived around midnight. As soon as we disembarked from the boxcars, we experienced utter chaos. Everyone tried to hold on to each other, especially to the children. It looked like a sea of humanity that had arrived in hell. We were surrounded by floodlights, soldiers with rifles pointing at us with a finger on the trigger. Everyone felt hopeless. At the same time, we were surrounded by nasty German police dogs, growling like they were ready to rip someone apart. Immediately, the soldiers separated the men from the women and then we marched toward a tall SS officer looking very intimidating in his shiny boots. He very calmly pointed his thumb to the left or the right. If you were chosen to go to the right, your life was spared. Everyone sent to the left went directly to the gas chambers.

Before we got off the train I had put on extra jackets so I looked bigger, because we figured that they would want us to work. Until this day, I think of the boys from my town; I was the only one born in 1929 who survived. The extra jackets may have made the difference.

Jacob, my father, and my older brother, Moshe, were tall, and I was behind them and passed, not knowing how lucky I was to have made the cut. Later I discovered that only four other boys from my hometown passed that selection, but they were born in 1928. The rest of my school friends did not and went to their deaths.

After the selection, a large group of us were standing there, when I noticed my mother and my younger sisters, Esther and Monica, with only a small empty space between us. So I said to my father, "How about if I run across and join them so I could be of help to them." My father said "OK." As I started running toward them, a "kapo" with a long rod yelled at me, grabbed me by the back of my neck, and threw me back screaming, "You can't go there." I returned to my father and complained to him about the kapo.

After the showers, we were issued the striped prisoner uniforms and wooden shoes and were marched to our assigned barrack. The atmosphere in our group was sad and hopeless. It's impossible to describe it. It was in the spring but it was very cold, with dreary rain. We had to stand shivering outside for hours before we were allowed inside the barrack.

As we were standing there, we noticed tall chimneys reaching skyward spewing out heavy black smoke with black cinders falling to the ground like snow. We were told they are called crematoriums and that they were burning the corpses after people were gassed there. Also, we saw a long fire the length of a football field with flames reaching the height of the pine trees. Again a kapo informed us that the crematoriums could not handle the volume, so they were burning the bodies in those pits. And the people had arrived yesterday, which meant our families. You cannot imagine our reaction because, in fact, our reaction was no reaction. I know that does not make any sense, but that is how we reacted. The transports from Hungary were so numerous that the killing rate was 10–12,000 people a day. I know this now because Museum researchers discovered this from German records.

I was lucky again, because in a week or ten days we were transported out of Auschwitz to Mauthausen in Austria. Mauthausen was a very large camp, and most of the prisoners were classified as “political.” The prisoners were of many nationalities from all over Europe, even Germans. Many of the Germans were serving long sentences for civil crimes, so, many of them were kapos.

After we were processed in Mauthausen, we were then shipped to a subcamp. My group was shipped to Melk. In Melk we were assigned to different types of jobs. Most of the time I worked building a tunnel under a huge mountain.

One day I worked the night shift, which ended at 8 a.m. At 7:30 a.m. I had to go to the latrine outside the tunnel. I was gone only minutes because we were not allowed much time. By the time I returned, there was heavy black smoke coming out of the tunnel, caused by thick BX cable on fire. Sixty-five people died from suffocation within minutes. Once again, my life was spared.

My father, my uncle Elje, and many from our transport were also in Mauthausen. My father was billeted on the other side of the camp, so we didn’t see each other very often, but in January of 1945, my uncle informed me that he had died.

My luck returned one beautiful day in early spring of 1945. I was supposed to be sleeping in my building (which was built with reinforced concrete). But instead, the kapo grabbed me and sent me on an assignment a short distance outside the camp. It was the best assignment I ever had. The sun was nice and warm and it was very pleasant for me because I usually worked in a tunnel with a pick and shovel. Our assignment was to clean up the twigs from the winter. When lunchtime came, we were enjoying the warm, beautiful sun, lying on the grass. I remember feeling very good because I had not experienced this for almost a year. As we were enjoying this moment, we heard

the drone of Allied bombers in the vicinity of our camp. They turned out to be British, and they mistook that building for an ammo depot and dropped 15 bombs on the sleeping night shift. Five hundred people were burned to death.

When the Russian troops reached Hungary, we were evacuated from Melk back to Mauthausen. When we arrived in Mauthausen, the Jews were separated from others, and we were put on the mountain in an inhospitable area with no shelter but thorn bushes. By now our rations consisted of crumbs from black bread, much of which was actually sawdust. The server had to use a ladle to put crumbs full of green mold in our hands. We also had a cup of broth made from sugar beets.

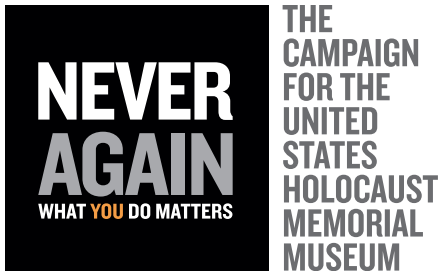
But we also now had a new worry: Why had they separated us from the other prisoners? We were convinced that they were going to shoot us. Then one morning we were told we were going on a march. The rumors had it that they were going to march us to the Swiss border and the Allies would give them trucks in exchange for us. I knew that had to be a rumor. I could not see anyone trading trucks for a group of Jews who were barely alive. As we marched westward, we were like basket cases; if someone fell down, the guard would shoot him.

After several days, we arrived in camp Gunskirchen in the Linz area. Once again, my good luck intervened and in the population of around 15,000, I ran into my cousin Jack and a couple of his friends. Jack had arrived there from Hungary. Like many Jews of military age in the Hungarian work battalions, they had been used as slave labor. So when the Hungarian troops were retreating into Austria, they ended up in Gunskirchen as well. That gave me a big psychological lift to hook up with them. By now, many of us who had come from Mauthausen looked like the walking dead. Still somehow, I survived.

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Tel 202.488.0400

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